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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Heroes in the Moonlight

"IT FEELS STRANGE PRACTICING WITH YOU, PROFESSOR."
Though Celia knew this already, dancing with Rio meant their bodies would have to be close enough to touch.
She looked up at his face from up close and blushed.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

"WOW! YOU'RE KIDDING ME! IT'S SO PRETTY!"
"I'M GLAD YOU'RE HAVING FUN."
Satsuki exclaimed in awe in spite of herself. Her voice could no longer reach the castle below her.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Rio
A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Miharu, Aki, and Masato's safety.

Amakawa Haruto
Rio's identity in a previous life as a Japanese university student. Miharu's childhood friend and Aki's half-brother.

Aishia
The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.

Ayase Miharu
Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Doesn't know that her savior Rio is the reincarnation of Haruto.

OTHER WORLDERS

Sakata Hiroaki
Young man summoned from another world as a hero.

Sendo Aki
Haruto's half-sister and Masato's stepsister.

Sendo Masato
Bright and honest; Aki's stepbrother.

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE

Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl

Orphia
High Elf Girl

Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl

Arslan
Werelion Boy

Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister

Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

Celia Claire
Daughter of a count and Rio's former academy teacher. Currently in hiding as she travels with Rio.

Latifa
Werefox Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan."

KINGDOM OF GALARC

Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a Duke & President of the Ricca Guild

Roanna Fontaine
A noble's daughter accompanying Princess Flora

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Prologue: Reflection

Somewhere in Japan, in the high school division of a middle-high school…

This is a story of when Amakawa Haruto and his father moved from the countryside back to the town where they formerly lived, on the very first day of high school.

In the morning, Haruto went to school with plenty of time to spare so that he wouldn't be late for the entrance ceremony. Once he arrived at school, he headed for the bulletin board where the class registrations were displayed. He stood before the board and stared carefully at the list of names. He found his own name first, but kept moving his gaze after that, seeking the name of another person in particular.

The name he was searching for was Ayase Miharu — his childhood friend and the girl he made a promise to reunite with one day. He wasn't certain if she would be attending the same high school as him, but the possibility was there. He'd been completely cut off from information regarding his mother and sister because of his father, but those shackles were released upon his entrance to high school.

His father told him of the reason for his divorce, the fact his mother and little sister could still be living in this town, and that similarly, he had heard Miharu was still living in this town, too. While he didn't know which school she was going to, living in the same town meant there was a possibility of going to the same one. As a result, whether from coincidence or inevitability, Haruto discovered Ayase Miharu's name on another class's roll.

She's here…

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Haruto felt elation swell in his chest and clenched his fist tightly. He lost track of time for a moment, staring at Miharu's name.

"Hey, you there. Head towards the entrance ceremony hall as soon as you've checked your class. You're gonna be late." A girl with a comforting tone of voice appeared behind Haruto. She had long, beautiful hair that reached her waist, a dignified face with cute features, and a slender body. Her beauty was enough to unwittingly draw the attention of others. In fact, the new students around them were all watching her with envy.

"Ah, yes. Sorry." Haruto turned and bobbed his head at the girl who had addressed him.

"Were you looking for your friend's name?" The girl cocked her head at Haruto in question.

"Yes, something like that."

"I see. Do you know where the hall is?"

"Yes, I should be fine. Thank you." Haruto gave her a gentle smile and attempted to leave.

"Oh, that's right! You!" the girl called after Haruto.

"Yes?" Haruto asked, turning back to the girl once more.

"I'm Sumeragi Satsuki — I'm a sophomore on the student council. May I ask for your name?" she asked.

"I'm Amakawa Haruto. It's nice to meet you, Satsuki," Haruto replied cheerfully.

"Same here. Then, once again, welcome to this school, Haruto. I hope we can get along for the next two years!" Satsuki said with a sweet smile.

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Chapter 1: The Days Leading to the Banquet

The Strahl region.

In a rocky area in the outskirts of Galtuuk, capital of the Kingdom of Galarc…

Miharu had woken up early before anyone else, changed into her casual clothes, and climbed up the ladder outside onto the roof of the rock house. Then, she aimlessly watched the sun rising in the sky by herself.

Nature spread out before her in a spectacle not easily witnessed on Earth, but Miharu's expression was dazed and her gaze wasn't fixed on anything. She was thinking about what happened last night.

Miharu had dreamed. It was a dream of the life of her childhood friend, Amakawa Haruto, set in a time period that shouldn't have been possible for Miharu to witness.

And when Miharu awakened from her dream, Aishia had been standing beside her, asking about whether she wanted to forget the dream or not, pressuring her to make a decision about staying beside Haruto.

As a result, Miharu answered that she wanted to be with Haruto and could still clearly remember the dream. But something didn't sit well with her.

I fell asleep before I knew it. And then it was morning…

She wasn't sure whether her conversation with Aishia had been reality, or something that had happened within her dream.

"…Maybe it was a dream after all. No, but…" Miharu muttered hesitantly, shaking her head.

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I definitely woke up and talked to Ai-chan.

Her memories were crystal clear, so she couldn't imagine that being a dream. And there was more she was concerned about, too.

The dream before I woke up was shown to me by Ai-chan, making Haruto the same person as Haru-kun... right?

At that time, they had been talking as though Haruto was the same as the Haruto she'd once known, but now that she thought about it, she had never confirmed the fact for sure.

On top of that, Miharu was currently in her first year of high school, while Haruto had died as a university student — the misaligned timelines also bothered her a bit.

...Yeah. I should try talking to Ai-chan one more time, after she gets up.

Miharu took a deep breath. However, no one in the rock house — including Aishia — was awake yet, so she'd have to wait here for a little longer. Miharu sat curled up on the roof as she continued gazing at the daybreak.

Her emotions were running high right now, so she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep if she tried, and she didn't want to do anything else either. She couldn't even appreciate the great expanse of nature before her. Sitting still made all kinds of thoughts swirl around her head, but she couldn't think sharply.

Thus, Miharu continued to sit on the roof of the rock house in her dazed mental state. She had no idea how much time had passed, but after a while...

"...ru?" A voice could be heard from beneath the roof, but Miharu was so immersed in her own thoughts that she didn't notice the person approaching.

"Miharu? Hey, Miharu?" This time, the voice repeated Miharu's name louder.

"...Huh? Ah, Haruto?!" Miharu stood up in a fluster when she realized she was being called, and she turned her gaze

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downwards. There was Rio with a sword in his hand.

“What are you doing so early in the morning? And up there, of all places?” Rio’s eyes were round as he curiously looked up at Miharu standing on the roof. The wind blew and sent a soft ripple through Miharu’s long hair.

“Ah, umm. I woke up early, so I thought I’d refresh myself,” Miharu said, making up a reason on the spot. Rio watched Miharu’s face worriedly.

“…Isn’t it cold?”

“No, I’m fine.” Miharu shook her head with a slightly nervous tone to her voice. The wind blew again; this time, it was a little stronger, and it gently flipped up Miharu’s long skirt.

“Ah…” Rio hurriedly averted his gaze, his face slightly red. He had seen it: the pure white underwear under Miharu’s skirt…

“Fweh, ah…” Miharu reflexively held her skirt down, but judging from Rio’s reaction there was no doubt he had seen it. At that, Miharu immediately turned scarlet.

“I-I’m sorry!” Rio apologized in a panic. “N-No, no. I-I’m the one who should be sorry f-for not being more carefu—!” Miharu blushed even more as she shook her head in embarrassment. She was so shaken up, she tried to back away in a fluster, but the surface on the roof of the rock house wasn’t exactly good for walking around on. Miharu tripped over the uneven surface and teetered dangerously.

“Look out!” As soon as Rio saw Miharu lose her balance, he enhanced his physical body and leaped for the roof, then gently supported Miharu’s body by holding her.

“Uh…” Miharu had squeezed her eyes shut when she was about to fall, but when she felt Rio hold her, she opened her eyes with a flinch.

“Are you all right?” Rio asked, peering at Miharu’s face from close-up.

“…Y-Yes.” Miharu stared back at Rio’s face and nodded

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hesitantly.

“Thank goodness…” Rio sighed in relief.

“Thank you… very much.” Miharu curled up on herself in Rio’s arms.

“Not a problem.” Rio shook his head with a smile. Miharu watched Rio’s face closely.

“…”

“…Is something the matter?” Rio tilted his head curiously.

“Huh? Ah, no, umm, err…!” Miharu returned to her senses with a gasp, reddening in the face once more as she tried to say something.

“Oh right, I’m sorry. I should probably move.” Rio seemed to think Miharu was embarrassed, as he distanced himself promptly. However, Miharu was reaching out to clutch Rio’s clothes before she could stop herself.

“Ah…”

“Miharu?” Rio was taken aback.

“Ah, umm, are you about to practice your sword skills, Haruto?” Miharu released Haruto’s clothes in a panic and blurted out an irrelevant question.

“Yes, it’s part of my daily training.” Nodding, Rio lifted the sword in his hand to show her.

“…May I watch you?” Miharu asked, having mustered up enough courage to do so.

“Of course, I don’t mind…” Rio said, nodding as he watched Miharu’s face.

“Then I’ll just sit down here.” Miharu did just that and hugged her knees to her chest once more.

“Put this on. It’s a little cold in the mornings.” Rio handed the towel he had brought along to Miharu for her to use like a blanket.

“…T-Thank you very much,” Miharu replied with a slight squeak, accepting the towel in a fluster.

“I’ll be off, then.” With that, Rio leaped down to the ground and began his sword practice alone.

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“Warm…” Miharu wrapped Rio’s towel around her shoulders and squeezed it tightly, feeling Rio’s warmth through the fabric. She could tell her heart was thumping away loudly.

He was so near… Yet, so far.

She still half-doubted whether Rio was really Haruto. However, the Rio down there swinging his sword was actually the reincarnation of Haruto — Miharu was keenly aware of that as she gazed at him.

Her heart beat even faster at that, showing no signs of slowing down.

H-Huh? W-What should I do…

Miharu could feel her body burning up and her heart thunder in her chest, making her panic at the unfamiliar sensation. The feeling only grew as she watched Rio swing his sword with an intense expression on his face, but she repeatedly took deep breaths to calm her agitated heart. She crouched over, frozen in place and continued to stare intently at Rio.

After a while, she was numbed enough to the feeling to start thinking for herself again. The first thing she thought of was, of course, Rio.

…I wonder what Haru-kun’s trying to accomplish in this world?

Aishia had said that Rio could no longer turn back. That was why he didn’t want to drag the people who were precious to him into his way of life…

Just what could Rio be trying to do here? This time, Miharu felt distressed as she watched Rio in frustration.

“Miharu?” Rio had finished his sword practice and returned to the roof of the rock house.

“Huh? Are you done with training already?” Miharu asked, blinking.

“Yes, I’ve gone through everything,” Rio said, watching Miharu somewhat dubiously. He had noticed her acting

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rather restless during his practice.

“I… see…” Miharu accepted his words awkwardly. It seemed like quite some time had passed without her noticing.

“Sara and the others still seem to be sleeping, and I’m about to go back inside. What will you do?”

“I’ll stay here a bit longer.”

“Okay… See you then.” A delicate silence fell between the two of them, before Rio made to descend from the roof.

“U-Umm, would you like to chat a little?” Miharu stopped Rio in a fluster. Her mouth had moved before her brain could think.

Rio’s eyes widened a bit. “…Sure. Then, if you don’t mind.” He sat down next to Miharu anyway.

“…” Miharu side-eyed Rio’s expression, huddling in on herself out of nervousness. In the end, Rio was the one who spoke first out of consideration for Miharu.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Ah, right. Umm…” Despite being the one to suggest they talk, Miharu had just been trying to stop him and didn’t have a topic decided yet at all, leaving her in a fluster. But Rio just tilted his head curiously and waited for her to speak as Miharu desperately wracked her brain, searching for a topic.

After a while, a thought popped up in her mind and she hesitantly opened her mouth. “U-Umm, yesterday, while everyone was in the bath, we were talking to Celia and she told us about your past…”

“…Ah, Professor told me about that afterward. I didn’t mean to hide the fact I was an orphan to anyone. Was it awkward because of me?” Rio gave a slightly questionable smile as he asked Miharu.

“N-No, not at all! Everyone wanted to hear about your past, so we were all listening very seriously,” Miharu said in a fluster.

“I see…” Rio smiled in embarrassment.

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“I also — I wanted to hear about it too. About your past. And how you grew up before you met us. If it’s okay with you, could you tell me a little more about that?” Miharu mustered up her courage and asked. She had been refraining from touching upon Rio’s past until now, but she decided that she wanted to be closer to Rio.

“I don’t think I’d be able to tell you anything interesting, though.” Rio shrugged his shoulders with a troubled face. He had expected this question would come up one day, so he wasn’t surprised.

“That’s not true. Of course, you don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to, but is there anything you CAN tell me?” While she normally would have backed down there, today’s Miharu pushed forward.

Rio made up his mind and nodded slowly. “…All right. Then, a story from before I became an orphan… I lived with my mother up until I was five years old. My father passed away soon after my mother gave birth to me.”

“I see.” Rio began his story with a gloomy start, but Miharu just nodded quietly.

“So, I became an orphan at five years old. My mother passed away, and my parents were migrants, so I didn’t have any relatives around, leaving me with nowhere to go other than the slums… I lived there as an orphan for two years, until I turned seven.”

“Ah…” Miharu didn’t know what to say and bit her lip.

“The turning point for me was when I regained my memories at seven years old, I guess. I nearly died from a very high fever, but it faded before I knew it and left me with my memories of my past life. When I look back on it now, I think it was probably Aishia who saved me. Although it doesn’t seem like she remembers doing so,” Rio said with an amused smile. Meanwhile, Miharu had a distressed expression on her face.

“As soon as I regained my memories, I was involved in a

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scuffle with the kingdom which led to my enrollment in the Royal Academy of Beltrum. That was where I became friends with Professor Celia. After I was falsely accused of a crime at twelve years old, I headed for my parents' hometown in the Yagumo region. It was on my way there that I met Latifa and took her to the village," Rio said in summary, turning to Miharu. "Do you have any questions so far?"

"Umm, what kind of person was your mother like?"

"...She was a strong, gentle, and warm person. After my father passed away, she raised me with care all by herself. She tried to protect me all the way up to her death..." Rio's expression was a little sad as he spoke.

"Was it an illness?"

"No, she was killed. Public safety isn't very good in this world." Rio tried to smile as brightly as he could and brush it off.

"T-That's..." Miharu's face twisted with sorrow.

"Don't worry about it." Rio said with a wry smile.

"But..." Miharu was on the verge of crying, her eyes shimmering with tears.

"...I've already processed my feelings within myself. That's why it's fine now," Rio stated firmly.

That can't be true, Miharu objected sadly in her heart. However, Rio looked like he had completely accepted everything, so she couldn't say it out loud.

A barely five-year-old child's mother had been murdered, and he'd lived as an orphan in the slums until the age of seven. There was no way that was fine.

"You must have gone through a lot... Losing your mother and your home, being all alone..." Miharu managed to say.

With no parent or home, just how did a five-year-old child survive? For Miharu, who was born in a world of peace, it was impossible to imagine.

"It was pretty tough. I did anything I could to live when I was an orphan. That's what I had to do, and even that was

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difficult. Fortunately, I was taken in by some thugs in the slums who gave me the minimum amount of leftovers while I had a use to them," Rio said with self-depreciation.

"..." They'd lived in different worlds — quite literally. Miharu was once again at a loss for words.

"Mm, what a nice morning!" The door to the rock house opened and Sara, Alma, Latifa, and Aishia appeared.

"Ah, I knew Onii-chan would be outside! Good morning!" Latifa said with a friendly smile, spotting Rio with her innocent gaze.

"Good morning, Latifa. And everyone else, too," Rio replied to Latifa with a smile.

"Good morning, Rio."

"Miharu's with you too, I see. Good morning."

Sara and Alma gave their morning greetings before looking at Miharu curiously.

"Yup, good morning everyone." Miharu put on a smile and replied. Her eyes were faintly shimmering with tears, but she wiped them away casually.

"..." Aishia watched Miharu silently from below.

"Good morning, Ai-chan." Miharu noticed she was being watched and called out to Aishia.

"Miharu, good morning," Aishia replied quietly.

"Ah, Miharu's wearing Onii-chan's towel around her shoulders! How nice!" Latifa chimed in, able to identify the towel as Rio's.

"I lent it to her because the mornings are cold. Why don't you warm up for our usual sparring match?" Rio said with a strained smile, leaping down from the roof to approach Latifa and the others.

"Yes, please!" Sara was the first to nod enthusiastically. The members of their group who practiced with weapons — Rio, Latifa, Sara, Alma, and Masato — sparred as part of their morning routine. They all woke up at different times, but it was usually Masato who arrived last.

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"..." Miharu looked down upon the scene near the doorway that had grown noisier all of a sudden, a soft smile on her face. Then, to replace Rio who had gone down to the ground, Aishia floated up to the roof.

"Miharu, did you sleep well last night?"

"...Ai-chan. Last night... that wasn't a dream, was it? Haruto is Haru-kun, isn't he?" Unable to withstand it any longer, Miharu questioned Aishia imploringly.

"Yup." Aishia nodded once.

"Ah..." Miharu gasped in shock at the confirmation that it wasn't a dream.

"Do you remember what I told you yesterday?" asked Aishia.

"Yeah. That someday soon, Haru-kun will tell me the truth and try to distance himself from us..." Miharu replied hesitantly.

"Yes. That's why when it happens, you can't run away, Miharu," Aishia stated in a flat voice.

"What can I do until then?" Miharu asked in near-confusion.

"Stay by Haruto's side as much as you can, and don't be afraid of him. Be gentle to him. Tell him clearly that you want to be with him. Because Haruto is a gentle and cowardly person," Aishia said in her usual flat voice, the words sounding very gentle. It was clear that she knew everything about Haruto and was thinking of Miharu.

Ah, that's right. I still don't know anything. About Haru-kun, about Haruto... Miharu felt extremely disheartened about her own worthlessness and frowned gloomily... But it wasn't too late.

"...Okay!" Miharu looked down at Rio talking to the others below and nodded with determination.

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After Rio sparred with Sara and the others as per their routine, it was time for breakfast.

“If Rio and Miharu are going to participate in the banquet, they’re going to need formal outfits,” Celia suggested during their meal. And so, it was decided that they would pay a visit to the Ricca Guild in Amande for some shopping today.

Sara, Orphia, and Alma had actually never visited human regions before, and Latifa hadn’t been in one for years. Miharu, Aki, and Masato weren’t too used to going outside either, so there was a need to limit the members who would be going out.

Rio and Miharu had to go as they were the ones attending the banquet, and Celia was going as the one with actual experience attending banquets. Accompanying them as their guard was Aishia. Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Aki, and Masato would stay back at the rock house.

Latifa looked like she wanted to go, but since she had promised not to be selfish as part of the condition for coming to Strahl, she didn’t make a fuss about it. And so, Rio’s group left the stone house in the morning and arrived at Amande. They immediately headed towards the Ricca Guild’s store.

“Fufu.” Although she was there as Miharu’s chaperone, Celia was in a good mood about the shopping trip and walked in the lead. She was so adorable, Rio and Miharu couldn’t help but chuckle to themselves.

Several minutes later, they arrived before the Ricca Guild building. “Let’s start by choosing Miharu’s dress,” Rio suggested.

“...I’m sorry for making you spend money on me.” Miharu hung her head apologetically. Naturally, there was a dress code for the banquet, but Miharu had completely forgotten about it until Celia had reminded her that morning. Doing anything in the world of nobility required money, and Miharu couldn’t help but feel regretful for forcing another

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burden onto Rio.

“It’s a necessary expense, so don’t worry about it. I need to buy a formal outfit too.” Rio shook his head with a smile.

“See, Miharu? Let’s show Haruto how wonderful you’ll look in a gown,” Celia giggled, pushing Miharu towards the store.

“…Okay.” While Miharu still looked a little apologetic, she nodded and started moving slowly. Rio and Aishia brought up the rear as they all entered the store.

“Welcome.”

As soon as they were inside, the graceful voice of a female shop assistant welcomed them. They had visited this store several times in this past, but the Ricca Guild was a high-class brand shop and its interior was similarly tranquil. Wealthy-looking customers could be spotted throughout the store, browsing through the clothes.

“Now, let’s start making some selections. I believe they deal with dresses on the third floor. We’ll have to get you measured first.” Celia headed for the third floor with confident footsteps.

They moved to the dress corner; with her experience in these kinds of stores, Celia first talked to a shop assistant and had them measure Miharu’s size. Miharu and Celia headed to the dressing room together. Rio and Aishia waited in a corner elsewhere. “I will now take your measurements. Can you get undressed down to your underwear?”

“Yes.” After Miharu entered the measuring room, she removed everything but her underwear, as instructed.

“…You really have a nice figure, Miharu.” Celia gazed at Miharu’s underwear figure from beside and sighed in awe.

“I agree, you’re very beautiful.” The shop assistant doing the measurements also complimented Miharu with a smile.

“Ahaha, thank you very much.” Miharu grinned bashfully and covered her chest with her arms. In no time at all, Miharu’s general size measurements had been skillfully

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recorded.

Afterward, they left the measuring room and finally began browsing the dress choices. The two of them started by going around the floor and picking everything that caught their eye. They filtered that selection down to the ones that looked good before Miharu moved to the dressing room and tried many different dresses with the help of the shop assistant. Each time she finished changing, the curtain of the dressing room would pull back to reveal Miharu in a new dress.

“Hmm, this one suits you too. Okay, try this one next.” Celia was enthusiastically enjoying the dress selection, offering dress after dress to Miharu.

“…” Rio fixedly watched Miharu change into a colorful range of dresses from a short distance away.

“Is Miharu beautiful?” Aishia suddenly asked Rio from beside him.

“…Yeah, she is.” Rio glanced at Aishia; he wore a hint of a shy smile.

“She’ll be happy if you tell her that,” said Aishia.

“You think so?” Rio tilted his head, watching Aishia in slight surprise.

“Yup.” Aishia nodded her head once.

As the two were exchanging words — “Hey, Haruto, Aishia. Which dress do you think looks better?” Celia turned back to them and asked.

“…I think dresses in cooler colors suit Miharu more,” Rio answered.

“I think so too,” Aishia agreed.

“Ah, yeah? That’s what I was thinking too! Okay then, can you try this dress next? There’s still plenty of options, so let’s get through them all!” Celia said, smiling innocently.

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After Miharu took her time carefully selecting a gown, it

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was Rio's turn to pick his formalwear. Miharu was just as excited as Celia for this, and Rio ended up becoming a dress-up doll for the two of them until they had carefully decided on an outfit for the banquet.

The group departed from Amande before sundown. Rio carried Celia, while Aishia carried Miharu with her wind spirit arts.

"We managed to get back before it got completely dark, at least." Rio sighed in relief as they arrived at the rocky area where their house was set up.

"Ahaha, sorry about that. I completely lost track of time while I was picking out clothes," Celia said apologetically.

"Me too. Sorry for losing myself there..." Miharu apologized with a guilty look.

Rio shook his head with a pleasant expression. "No, we got some good shopping done thanks to you."

As they conversed, they reached the area above the rock house.

"...Masato's practicing outside," Aishia muttered, peering down.

Miharu checked to see if anyone else was outside. "You're right. Is everyone else making dinner? We're home, Masato!" she announced loudly.

"Oh, you're finally back. You took forever." When Masato heard Miharu's voice, he looked towards where Rio and the others had just descended and shrugged in exasperation.

"Hmm, were you waiting for us?" asked Rio.

Masato scratched his head. "Ah, no. Well, kind of. Come inside first," he muttered evasively before making for the front door.

Did something happen? Rio and the others exchanged glances before deciding to follow Masato for now.

As soon as Masato opened the door, he yelled, "Oi, Haruto and the others are back!"

"Really?! Miharu, Aishia, and Celia should wash their

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hands and come to my room immediately! Onii-chan, you wait in the living room!" Latifa called out right away.

It seemed like this was the "something" that was happening.

"Hmm, I wonder what it is? Let's go." Celia smiled in anticipation and headed to the bathroom to wash her hands before walking to Latifa's room. Miharu and Aishia followed her lead.

Rio and Masato waited in the living room together, with Rio going to wash his hands after the girls were done. "What's this about?" he asked Masato.

"Ah, you'll find out soon. I'm sweaty, so I'm gonna take a bath. Later!" With that, Masato departed for the bathroom with a sharp grin. By wanting to get cleaned up, he seemed to be acting out of consideration for the others, oddly enough.

Rio went ahead and prepared tea while he waited for Latifa and the girls in the living room. Less than ten minutes later, all the women of the house appeared before him.

"Thanks for waiting, Onii-chan! Ta-da!"

Latifa was the first among them to appear in the living room, twirling around once before posing to show off her uniform to Rio. Aishia, Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Miharu, and Aki were also wearing uniforms of the same design. Other than Latifa and Orphia grinning happily and Aishia with her usual expression, the other girls all looked embarrassed.

"...I'm definitely surprised." Rio gazed upon the uniform-clad girls with round eyes.

"Ehehe. What do you think, Onii-chan?" Latifa asked bashfully.

"It looks really great on you," Rio said honestly. Latifa beamed with innocent delight.

"Yay! Everyone made them together, based on Miharu's school uniform!" she explained.

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“I see. It does bear some resemblance to the uniform Miharu wore when she first came here. But I wasn’t expecting the Professor and Aishia…” Rio glanced at Miharu, before looking at Celia and Aishia’s uniformed figures.

“I-I just put it on because I was told to…” Celia seemed to be embarrassed by the unfamiliar uniform, fidgeting as her cheeks reddened.

“Does it look good?” Aishia tilted her head.

“Yup. You both look great in them,” Rio praised the two of them a bit shyly.

“Hehe, we made their uniforms on the way here from the village. But since we couldn’t take their exact measurements, Aishia’s was made to be around the same size as Miharu’s and Celia’s was based off the impression we got from Rio’s stories, making it a little bigger than Latifa’s,” Orphia said a bit proudly.

Come to think of it, Orphia asked a lot about the Professor’s height and stature before. “I see… Orphia, Sara, Alma. You all look great. Miharu and Aki too,” Rio said, complimenting everyone else as well.

“Thank you very much!” Orphia said, delighted.

The others were embarrassed, but happy.

“It was worth making them to show Onii-chan!” Latifa said to Miharu and Orphia, laughing brightly.

Orphia nodded warmly. “Right, Miharu?”

“…Yup.” Miharu nodded in embarrassment.

“Wait, did you only make them for that reason?” Rio was slightly taken aback to hear they were just made to be shown to him.

“That’s right, we wanted to surprise Onii-chan!” Latifa nodded without an ounce of shyness to her.

Rio’s lips turned upwards in a smile as he looked around at everyone. “…I see. I was really surprised, so thank you. And everyone else, too,” he said awkwardly.

“No, it was fun wearing the same clothes as everyone

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else," Sara said, blushing.

"I'm not used to clothes like this, so it's a little embarrassing," Alma added, also blushing. They both looked down at their uniforms.

"Uniforms aren't a part of the village culture, after all," said Rio.

"Huh, really. I wore a school uniform back when I attended the Royal Academy, and Rio wore one while he was there too," Celia said with interest.

"I think I would have liked to have seen the Professor in the academy's uniform," Rio said, looking at Celia cheekily.

"D-Don't say that. It's embarrassing. And I'm wearing one right now... Isn't that enough?" Celia shyly averted her eyes from Rio with a huff.

"I would have liked to see Onii-chan in a uniform too! He must have been so cool." Latifa must have been imagining Rio in a uniform, as she was giggling quite a bit.

"Why don't you make a uniform for Rio, then?" Celia said, struck with the idea.

"Oh, that sounds good! What do you think, Miharu? Orphia?" Latifa exclaimed, completely on board with that plan.

"Hmm, sounds interesting. We'll have to start with measurements; we can make a matching one for Masato, too," Orphia said. "I have the measurements from the formalwear fitting," Miharu added.

"Ah, no, I don't need that..." Rio shyly tried to refuse, but it seemed it was out of his hands — there'd be a uniform made for him in the near future.

Thank goodness... Rio's able to make friends with people his age, Celia thought, watching Rio with a happy expression on her face. Knowing what she did about his academy days, she was as happy to see him surrounded by people who understood him as she would have been for herself. And yet, her own romantic heart did feel a bit conflicted about how

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they were all — with the exception of Masato — cute and attractive girls.

“Okay, we’ll definitely make some uniforms for Onii-chan and Masato in the near future. Now that we’ve shown off our own uniforms, let’s see the outfits you two decided on! Show us!” Latifa whined at Rio and Miharu. It was possible that she had chosen this timing to show off their uniformed figures so that she wouldn’t fall behind Miharu, who would have bought a gown in Amande.

“Then let’s try them on,” Rio said, chuckling. “Miharu?”

“…Okay.” Miharu smiled bashfully and subtly nodded her head. Roughly 20 minutes later, Rio and Miharu had changed into their formal outfits and were standing in the living room.

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Masato, who had finished his bath, let out a sound of amazement. “Ooh!”

“That’s amazing, Onii-chan! So cool! Miharu looks beautiful too!” Latifa was quite excited as she shouted her words of praise.

“You really look beautiful, Miharu. And Rio looks handsome too.” Sara also praised Miharu before turning to praise Rio next with embarrassment.

“This design doesn’t exist in the village. So there are outfits like this out there.”

“Rio looks slender like this, and Miharu’s great figure is emphasized.”

Orphia and Alma were also looking at Rio and Miharu with interest.

“Thank you very much,” Rio said awkwardly.

“Ahaha, it feels a bit embarrassing, being stared at so much.” Miharu’s cheeks reddened as she averted her eyes, landing on Aki instead. “What do you think, Aki?”

Aki had been watching Miharu with adoration. She snapped back to her senses when Miharu addressed her, nodding firmly. “…Yeah, it’s beautiful!”

“Hehe, thank you.” Miharu smiled happily.

Aki tilted her head. “By the way, does this mean you’ll have to dance in those outfits during the banquet?” she asked Rio.

“Hmm, I wonder. Will we?” Rio had taken etiquette lessons in his time at the Royal Academy, but he had never attended a real banquet before, so he asked Celia.

“Well, you’re not forced to participate, but there will be an opportunity to do so while you’re there,” Celia replied, drawing on her experience of attending noble banquets.

“R-Really?” Miharu’s body stiffened in fright.

“Ah, I see. Is it possible that you don’t know how to dance, Miharu?” Celia asked, to which Miharu nodded hesitantly in response.

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"…Yes."

"Hmm. Well, it won't be a problem if you can't dance, but we don't know for sure what might happen, so maybe it'd be more reassuring if you learned the basics of how to dance? If you'd like, I could teach you in the time before the banquet…"

"Would you? I would really like that, please!" Miharu sighed in relief, relying on Celia's expertise.

"Got it. Just leave it to me!" Celia agreed confidently. "Rio can be your practice partner too. You learned how to dance at the academy, right Rio?"

"Yes. Very roughly, though…" In contrast to Celia's confidence, Rio nodded weakly. He hadn't danced once in the four years since he fled the academy, so it made sense that he had no confidence in himself.

"Well, I'll need to show Miharu an example and check how much you remember, so why don't you dance with me for a bit to jolt your memory? Since you're wearing your outfit and all. Now, take your stance, won't you?" Celia suggested, raising her right hand to urge him to take it. At that, Miharu and everyone else naturally gathered their attention on the two of them with great interest.

"I understand. Then, if you'd excuse me." Rio grasped Celia's right hand with his left and pressed his body up to hers. His right hand gently supported her back.

"…Y-Yep, looks like you have a proper form." It was something she should have known, but to dance as a pair, they had to press their bodies close to each other. Celia looked up at Rio's face from close-up and blushed.

"Thanks. It feels strange having you as a dance partner, Professor." Rio smiled faintly.

Uuh… I was so excited about getting to show a professor-like side of myself, but now everyone's watching and I feel so embarrassed… Celia thought rather belatedly.

"Could you take the lead? Make sure you're watching

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closely, Miharu.”

“Okay.”

Rio immediately took a step and began leading Celia. His steps were fluid, and Celia followed his lead easily, naturally moving her feet and body.

“Wah…” Latifa and the others gulped as they watched them dance together.

Rio stopped dancing after a few seconds. “I only remember the basic movements, but how was I?” he asked Celia.

“…More than good enough, I’d say. It was very easy to dance with you.” The parties held by nobility didn’t particularly treat dancing as a competition; it wasn’t as though long-term pairs were formed for it. Of course, it was better to be good at dancing than not, but the dancing itself was just a form of social interaction that changed depending on your partner at the time, so while it wasn’t especially important, not being able to do the basics was seen as shameful.

In that regard, Rio’s dance was a passing mark. It was clear that he was carefully attempting to recreate each and every movement, giving a sense of stability. As long as he could remember the steps, there shouldn’t be any problems.

“No, my steps aren’t quite there yet, so I’d appreciate your instruction in that regard,” Rio asked of Celia.

“Okay. Then first, let’s have Miharu try to dance a little.” Once Celia had a grasp of Rio’s level, she invited Miharu over next.

“Huh? Me? Right now?! I can’t!” Miharu said, panicking.

“That’s not true. If you can remember the basic steps, you’ll be able to dance to a minimum degree, and if Rio leads you, your feet should move naturally. Let’s start with forming a hold. You’re wearing your gown and all.” Celia giggled, grabbing Miharu’s hand and pulling her to stand before Rio.

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“Oh…” Miharu hung her head in embarrassment. Celia had been so beautiful when she was dancing… just imagining herself being pressed that close to Rio’s body had Miharu’s heart pounding excessively.

“…May I have your right hand?” Rio raised his left hand rather hesitantly.

“Y-Yes. Uh…” Miharu nervously raised her right hand, which Rio grabbed tightly. The sensation of Rio’s hand directly against hers, followed by the close contact of their bodies as they formed a hold, left Miharu’s heart pounding violently.

“Place your left hand on my right shoulder as a support. Right, like that. If you try to maintain your stance with only your arm strength, you’ll lose your form easily, so focus on using your stomach and back muscles in your upper body. That’s good. This is the basic stance when dancing,” Rio explained as he moved his own arms and legs, adjusting Miharu’s positioning.

“I see…” Miharu replied in a stiff voice, trying to stifle the thumping in her chest.

W-We’re pressed so close. The same thought crossed my mind when they were dancing earlier, but… Having actually formed a hold, the contact of their bodies was a lot more than she had expected.

“Hmph. You look really good together in your formal outfits. I want to wear a dress and dance with Onii-chan, too.” Latifa was watching them with slight jealousy.

“Hmm. Even the minute details of Miharu’s dress design is elaborate, so it might be complicated to create, but I might be able to manage something?” Orphia analyzed the dress ambitiously, wondering if she could make one herself.

“Really?!” Latifa’s eyes sparkled.

“Yup. Everyone looks like they want to dance with Rio while wearing a dress, after all. I’ll do my best.” Orphia giggled as she motivated herself, looking over at Sara and

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Alma's faces.

"W-What are you saying?!" Sara had been staring fixedly at Rio and Miharu, but when Latifa and Orphia's conversation reached her ears, she was taken aback.

"Well, as long as we don't disrupt Rio and Miharu's lessons, we should be able to sit in and learn ourselves," Alma expressed casually.

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Chapter 2: To the Capital, Galtuuk

The days went flying by after Rio and Miharu bought their formal outfits. They stayed busy with dance lessons for the banquet, taking Latifa and the spirit folk girls out to see the city, taking Miharu to meet with Liselotte and plan for the banquet…

Finally, the banquet was only three days away.

One afternoon, in front of the rock house, everyone was seeing off Rio and Miharu as they left to attend the banquet, with Aishia going with them as a guard.

“We’ll be going now. Make sure to listen to what Celia and Sara say, okay?” Miharu said to Aki and Masato.

“Yup. Take care, Miharu. And look for my brother as well,” Aki said.

“No need to worry while we’re in this house. Say hi to Satsuki for us,” Masato added.

“Please look after Aki and Masato while we’re gone. You be good too, Latifa.” Rio said to Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma, before addressing Latifa as well.

“Yup, leave it to us!” The three spirit folk girls nodded firmly.

“Got it, Onii-chan!” Latifa said, also nodding energetically.

“Rio, you have to make sure you escort Miharu properly. With her personality, she’s bound to be nervous. Aishia, you look after Rio and Miharu for us,” Celia said.

“Of course.”

“Leave it to me,” Rio and Aishia both replied together.

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Celia smiled softly as she gave her words of farewell. “See you later, then.”

“Have a nice trip, Rio, Lady Aishia.”

“I’ll be waiting, Onii-chan, Aishia!” Sara and Latifa followed her lead.

“Shall we get going, then, Miharu?” Rio smiled at everyone in response and prompted Miharu, who was saying goodbye to Aki and Masato a short distance away, to leave. Miharu wrapped up her conversation and approached Rio.

“Thank you, Haruto,” Miharu said with a bow.

“Sure.” Rio nodded coolly. “Let’s go.”

Aishia kicked off the ground and rose into the air first. Her movements were smooth and elegant.

Uh… I was going to ask Aishia to carry Miharu…

She was so confident in her actions, it sometimes — no, it *often* left Rio at a loss.

“U-Umm, then, will you carry me, Haruto?” Miharu asked Rio. Calling Aishia back now to ask her to do the transporting would be rude to Miharu.

“…Okay. Then, excuse me.” If Miharu herself didn’t mind, then Rio didn’t have a reason to refuse her. Their recent dance lessons had given them more opportunities to stick closely to each other, but while their dances weren’t awkward, this was a different situation entirely. With resolve, Rio approached Miharu with discomfort in every step.

“Uh…” When Rio picked Miharu up in a princess carry, Miharu stiffened her body slightly. For the record, Miharu herself was still nervous every time she had to stick closely to Rio during their dance lessons, but recently, she had been trying to close the distance between them herself.

Seems like Miharu has been aggressively trying to get closer to Rio lately… Having known her since before they came to Strahl, Sara, Orphia, and Alma had noticed that fact and exchanged casual looks with each other.

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Latifa must have had her own thoughts about it, as she stared at Miharu intently. “See you later then, Onii-chan! Miharu!” She hugged Rio from behind as he was carrying Miharu.

“Yeah, we’ll be back soon,” Rio replied and chuckled with a smile.

“We’ll be going now, Latifa,” Miharu said. After a while, once Latifa stepped back from Rio, he gently floated up into the air with his wind spirit arts.

“If it’s possible, we’ll try to take Satsuki outside of the castle. Either way, we should be back in a week’s time!”

Rio departed with those words, finally heading to the banquet as Celia and the others watched on.

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Several hours later, in Amande…

While the venue of the banquet was at the royal castle in Galtuuk, the capital of Galarc, it had been decided that they would head there by Liselotte’s personal enchanted ship. The plan was to depart from Amande tomorrow and arrive at the capital in the afternoon, which would be two days before the banquet.

The fact Miharu was a friend of the heroes from another world was shared among the mansion’s attendants, and Miharu’s hair was currently her natural color. This was done because it would have been cumbersome to explain why her hair was a different color to Satsuki at the castle. Liselotte was aware of the existence of artifacts that could alter hair color, but Rio offered to lend several of the hair color altering artifacts, and came to an agreement that its existence wouldn’t be revealed to a third party.

After arriving in Amande, Aishia changed into her spirit form while Rio and Miharu headed straight for Liselotte’s estate together.

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“Welcome, Sir Haruto.”

When they arrived at the mansion gates, the gatekeeper greeted them respectfully. He was already able to recognize him by sight.

“Good day. I should have an appointment; could you take care of the procedures needed?” Rio said, but before he could explain his business, another soldier went running towards the mansion.

“We have heard already. I shall lead you there, so please follow me.” Thus, Rio and Miharu were led inside the estate grounds. There they were met by the attendant, Cosette, by the mansion door.

“Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu — welcome.” Cosette held the skirt of her uniform in both hands and curtseyed elegantly.

“Nice to see you, Cosette,” Rio replied with a bow. He had met Cosette numerous times already, so he was already familiar with her. Miharu followed Rio’s greeting and bowed too.

“Please, come this way.” Cosette immediately started walking, inviting Rio and Miharu inside. Rio and Miharu followed her lead. Cosette’s way of walking was truly elegant and beautiful.

What a beautiful person. Feeling the allure of a mature woman, Miharu was overwhelmed by Cosette’s appearance and the way she carried herself.

“By the way, if you don’t mind, may I ask you something out of curiosity? It would intrude on your private affairs, so you don’t have to answer me if you don’t feel inclined to do so,” Cosette said with reservation as they walked.

“I don’t mind. What is it?” Rio asked readily. Discussing private matters in business was complicated, but in forming harmonious relationships, it could very well have a positive outcome.

He had met with Cosette many times already, so it wasn’t unnatural for her to ask more personal questions to a

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degree. However, Cosette's question far surpassed Rio's expectations, taking him by surprise. That being said, the relationship between Rio and Miharu hadn't been explained in detail to anyone but Liselotte, so their situation was one that was very easily misunderstood. It was understandable for Cosette to be curious.

"Are the two of you romantically involved?"

"Huh? No, umm..." Miharu replied innocently, turning bright red.

"Ahaha. We're not," Rio denied with a strained smile.

"R-Right..." Miharu had on a slightly conflicted expression, but she nodded along with Rio.

"Why, is that so? I couldn't help but wonder at all the beautiful women gathered around Sir Haruto, what with Lady Cecilia and Lady Aishia." Cosette burned Miharu's reaction into her mind as she spoke with an elegant smile.

"Unfortunately, I do not have such a relationship with anyone." Rio shook his head, a strained smile still on his face.

Cosette covered her mouth with her hand in a show of refined surprise, choosing not to comment further on Rio's romantic relationships. "Oh my, that is most unexpected... Oh, do pardon me. This isn't something for me to pry too deeply into. We'll be arriving at the guest room for the two of you soon, so please relax there. As you already know, my master is currently out of town, but she should be back by tomorrow morning."

Afterward, Rio and Miharu soon arrived at the room they were staying in, but that particular day, Rio and Miharu slept in completely different rooms.

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Several hours later, in the break room of the mansion for the attendant girls who served Liselotte, Cosette was sitting

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on the sofa with her colleagues, Natalie and Chloe. She sighed.

"I expected it to an extent, but Sir Haruto's a more formidable opponent than I thought," Cosette muttered listlessly as she sipped her tea.

"...You still haven't given up?" Natalie looked at Cosette in exasperation. Meanwhile, Chloe was looking at Cosette with great interest.

"Of course. I can't just sit by idly when there's such a good man in front of me!" Cosette said enthusiastically. A handsome face, refined mannerisms that exuded elegance and high education, and strength that bordered on near-inhuman levels... Cosette had met many men through the Ricca Guild before, but none had been as fine as the boy named Haruto.

"But he's surrounded by so many beautiful people already, you know? Didn't you reach the conclusion that he wouldn't even blink at anyone unless they were as beautiful as Lady Liselotte or Aria?" While the other female attendants of the estate had some form of admiration towards the boy named Haruto, most of them had immediately given up on that fleeting admiration once they saw the extraordinary beauty of the likes of Aishia and Cecilia. While they still enjoyed feasting upon the sight of Haruto from up close, they no longer had any hopes beyond that.

"I have good news regarding that. At present, I have confirmed that neither Lady Miharu, Aishia, nor Cecilia are in a romantic relationship with Sir Haruto." Cosette giggled smugly.

Well, I don't think Lady Miharu feels the same way, though, she thought to herself.

"Did you ask them that directly? How bold..." Natalie looked at Cosette in half-exasperation, half-awe. Meanwhile, Chloe was silently but intently listening to her senior colleagues.

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“Well, it’s part of our job description to have a grasp of the guests we come in contact with.” Cosette brushed it aside under the just cause of their job duties, smiling pleasantly.

Natalie glared at Cosette with narrowed eyes. “But Sir Haruto is a particularly special guest of Lady Liselotte. Make sure you don’t do anything to upset her, okay?”

“Oh my, but it’s also our job to be close with the guests, right? There are some relationships that are made more harmonious with more personal questions, you know?” Cosette said, shrugging her shoulders as she took a sip of her tea.

Liselotte’s attendants assisted her in both public and private matters, so they were given comprehensive privileges and dealt with the business matters of the Ricca Guild too. In order to achieve beneficial trade conditions, there was nothing better than forming close relationships with clients, so the attendants were asked to assertively pursue close relationships with the clients if given the chance.

“In your case, the problem is that you often become too intimate, and only with the men…” Natalie muttered.

“You’re always so serious. Don’t you know love burns brighter with obstacles in the way? This is why you’re doomed to be single forever.” Cosette sighed tiredly. At present, Cosette had a very high reputation among the men she was dealing business with, and had a track record of achieving very favorable conditions until now. There had even been heirs that had sent her marriage proposals.

“M-My single status is irrelevant to this. You shouldn’t be one to talk; you’re so picky you can’t keep your relationships going for very long.” Natalie pouted her lips and refuted Cosette’s words.

“Well, I won’t deny that. But I do draw a clear line so that my work isn’t impacted, so you can rest assured in that regard.” Cosette giggled mischievously.

“…You’re actually serious about this, aren’t you? I never

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expected you'd be so enthusiastic about a younger man." Natalie pressed her hand to her forehead and sighed heavily.

"He's younger, but it's only by three or four years. There's no age gap too wide for being seriously in love, and unlike those male nobles that only believe in dating younger women, this age gap is more realistic," Cosette said.

"I'm sure you know this already, but if you prioritize your personal feelings over the necessity of your duties and cause Lady Liselotte trouble, I'm going to report you to her directly," Natalie said bluntly.

"Of course. That's why I told you from the start. He's a more formidable opponent than I thought. First, you have to know the enemy. Then, if the chances are low, you gradually work your way up. ...Or rather, he isn't the kind of person you can hit on lightly, so you should be careful too." Cosette nodded with a serious expression, then jested with the latter half of her words. Her words were directed at Natalie, but her gaze flickered over at Chloe too.

"W-Why are you assuming I'd hit on him?" Natalie asked in a high-pitched voice.

"Oh, was I wrong? When Sir Haruto took out that minotaur in a single blow, I saw that you had hearts in your eyes, too."

"I did not!"

"Really? I was going to give you pointers for winning Sir Haruto over as your close friend, but if you insist otherwise, I guess I won't," Cosette said, casually playing the fool.

"That's fine," Natalie replied.

"Umm, I want to hear it! Haruto... What kind of person is Sir Haruto?" Chloe had been listening silently until now, when she raised her hand and expressed her thoughts.

"Oh my, oh my — it seems like Chloe is honest, unlike Natalie." Cosette smiled cheerfully.

"Ah, no, it's not that I'm aiming for him or anything, it's just... I did something rude to Sir Haruto in the past, so I

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want to apologize to him for that!" Chloe explained in a fluster.

"Come to think of it, you were already familiar with him to begin with," Cosette said, accepting Chloe's explanation at face value.

"But it didn't seem like he was bothered by anything in particular, did it?" Natalie asked, digging deeper for Chloe's intent to confirm the truth.

"That may be true, but I just can't accept it myself. He even saved my mother and little sister when Amande was being attacked by monsters..." Chloe hung her head in regret.

"Well, it's the job of a senior to hear out the woes of their junior workers. For Chloe's sake, I'll tell you what I have of his profile," Cosette said.

"I guess we have no choice." Natalie's lips loosened into a smile as she sighed in exasperation.

"From what I can see, Sir Haruto is a friendly and easygoing person, but he won't start the conversation himself. He's sensitive about his distance to others, and has quite a wide sense of personal space. The way he's used to women isn't because he's a womanizer, but he's not completely immune to them either. It's not like he's without secrets, but I believe he has a very sincere personality. His defenses are probably very high, but he treats the people he's close to very well. If you can put yourself in a position closer than friends but not quite lovers, you should be able act persistently without being treated harshly in return," Cosette explained easily, mostly towards Chloe.

"I see you've done another detailed psychoanalysis. For a man, no less." Natalie couldn't help but smile bitterly.

"Thanks, I'll take that as a compliment," Cosette said with a grin. "By the way, this is my warning insofar as winning him over: because of our positions, even if we become close to Sir Haruto, pursuing him with persistence would be a bad

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idea. We have to slowly and steadily make contact with him every chance we get, leaving an impression on him of ourselves — to a degree that isn't rude. If you don't have much romantic experience, you shouldn't be aggressive with the way you show your affections. Only make contact with the mindset of waiting for the right chance. That way, luck may fall in our favor someday. See? Isn't he formidable?" she said smoothly once again, giving a small wink.

"I-I had no intention of winning him over though…" Chloe averted her eyes from Cosette without thinking.

"Really? Well, if you wanted to take aim for him seriously, I'm here to talk about it. You too, Natalie," Cosette said, smiling pleasantly.

"I'll pass." Natalie paid her no mind and shrugged.

"Is that true, I wonder? They say that love is blind, after all. Maybe you're just not aware of it yet. Your emotions could just explode all at once one day, so be careful." Cosette met Natalie's eyes and signaled a look towards Chloe.

"…I guess." Natalie saw through Cosette's intentions and sighed with a tired nod. Chloe was still a newcomer that hadn't been working for that long. She was denying it herself, but there was a fair chance her feelings towards Haruto could develop into romantic ones. As Chloe's seniors, they had to warn her of such things.

Geez, she looks like she's talking about herself when she's actually thinking of Chloe, Natalie thought. Despite looking like she didn't care about things outside of business matters, the fact that Cosette actually paid attention to the fine details like that made her difficult to hate.

"And so, I'll be pursuing that lucky chance with everything I've got, so make sure to inform me whenever Sir Haruto visits."

…Nevermind. She was probably only thinking of herself after all; that part of her was detestable. Natalie breathed a small sigh.

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The weather was pleasant the next day. After Liselotte returned to the estate that morning, she, along with Rio and Miharu, boarded the enchanted ship heading for Galtuuk and departed at noon.

The capital of Galtuuk was to the northeast of Amande, but the enchanted ship Liselotte personally owned made steady progress through the blue skies instead of the blue seas. They were expected to arrive at the capital by early afternoon.

Enchanted ships were sailing vessels made of wood with an iron plate joined to the hull and wings on both sides for altitude adjustment during flight. These ships were ancient magic artifacts made in the days of the Divine War, but due to their mass production during the war, there were comparatively greater numbers of them compared to other ancient artifacts. Despite that, each ship still cost a tremendous amount of money — enough that a noble daughter who wasn't even a lord shouldn't have been able to afford a personal one — so most common folk had never even set foot on one. Of course, this was Miharu and Rio's first time experiencing such a thing, too.

Once the enchanted ship had departed from Amande and stabilized in flight, Liselotte invited Rio and Miharu to a guest room inside the ship to have a discussion. She had been out of town until that morning and had been on a tight schedule to depart immediately afterward, yet she showed no sign of fatigue at all.

"How are you enjoying the journey via enchanted ship so far?" she asked.

"The ship's interior is quite comfortable and pleasant," Rio said cheerfully.

"I agree. It barely shakes at all, I'm shocked," Miharu replied honestly.

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“I’m glad to hear that. I’ll make sure to set aside some free time later, so please enjoy the view from the deck too. For now, I was hoping you’d join me for a chat,” Liselotte said with a gentle smile.

“Yes, gladly!” Miharu nodded happily.

“Then first, let’s go over the plans for the two days before the banquet starts. We’ll arrive in the capital today, with plenty of time before the sun sets. I’ll send an invitation, so please stay at the lodgings in my family home tonight. The plan is to visit the castle tomorrow morning, so if we’re lucky, you’ll be able to see Lady Satsuki the day before the banquet begins.” At present, Satsuki was refusing all outside audiences until the banquet began. Thus, they weren’t sure whether they would actually be able to meet her unless they went to the castle, but with Miharu being her friend, the chances were high. Liselotte was banking on that.

“Wonderful. Also, I don’t know if this is enough to show my gratitude, but I borrowed the kitchen in your estate to make some cakes from my world. Please have some. Although, you may have had similar sweets in this world, and I don’t know if it’ll suit your preferences…” Miharu trailed off, presenting a large basket. She placed it on the table in front of the sofa she was seated on.

“Oh my, thank you very much. I often make snacks for the development of Ricca Guild products, but I have no eye for sweet things. Do you mind if I try some right away?” Liselotte said happily. If it was a cake she didn’t recognize, she was happy to pay for the recipe; even if she knew the recipe of the cake, the taste could vary differently depending on how it was made.

“Of course not — please go ahead. They’re being cooled with a magic artifact, but the sooner they’re eaten the better,” Miharu said with a nod, having brought it out for that purpose.

“Then, let us eat them before they get warm. Aria, please

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prepare a knife and plates," Liselotte ordered eagerly.

"Understood." Aria nodded respectfully and made her way to the cutlery cupboard in the room. In no time at all, enough plates for everyone were lined on the table.

"I'll open it now, then." Miharu opened the basket so that Liselotte and Aria could see. As soon as she did, a white wave of cold air came flowing out of the basket. It was the effect of the artifact.

The inside of the basket had been divided into four sections, each with their own entire cake placed inside. They were small in size but large in quantity, making it a difficult amount to eat for just them.

"Oh my, there's so many! They all look delicious. Oh, how wonderful. To think I'd be able to eat so many cakes..." Apple pie, mille crepe, no-bake cheesecake, Mont Blanc. Liselotte's eyes sparkled, her joyous words coming from the bottom of her heart. One look at her expression made it clear that she was being sincere.

Aria also seemed to have an interest in the sweets, as she looked at the cakes with deep interest.

"There's a lot, so please have some too, Aria. If there's any left over after that, please share them with the other attendants too," Miharu said, making Aria's brows twitch in response.

"Thank you for your kindness. No doubt this is more than the three of us can handle. Aria, you can go get a plate for yourself," Liselotte said, giving special permission for her attendant to eat some too.

"...It's an honor. Then, I shall prepare more tea as well." Aria gave a faint smile and immediately began to prepare the tea and a plate.

"I'm going to divide the cakes, then. Lady Liselotte, which one would you like to try first? I'm sure you... might need an explanation, so just let me know," Miharu said, glancing over at Aria who was preparing tea at the kitchenette in the

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room.

Liselotte had shared the fact she had memories of her past life with Rio and Miharu the first time they visited her mansion together. That was why, normally, there would be no need to explain the cakes to her in this situation, but it was unclear whether Aria knew of Liselotte's secret or not. Miharu was being considerate of that.

"You can relax. After the first day I met Miharu, I explained my secret to Aria alone," Liselotte revealed.

"R-Really?" Miharu tilted her head, her eyes wide.

"Yes. It would save me from a lot of explaining, seeing as I would be meeting with you many times in the future. Aria is generally always by my side, as she's my most trusted confidant."

"But… I'm sorry. Because of me…"

"No, now that so many people have been summoned from Earth, it's more than likely that others will discover the secret of the Ricca Guild, just like you have. That may cause others to attempt to contact me directly. It was the perfect chance to reveal it to her," Liselotte said, shaking her head with a bit of a bitter smile.

Well, I still haven't told father and mother yet…

A somewhat guilty look appeared on her face. Her parents would normally be the first people she'd reveal the truth to, but that was precisely why it made the decision so difficult for her.

"At any rate, other people aside, there's no particular need to be considerate when you're around Aria, so please speak freely. Several of the cakes here have also been developed as Ricca Guild products with Earth vocabulary as names already. Apple pie, mille crepe, Mont Blanc, and… Is this no-bake cheesecake?" Liselotte smiled brightly.

"…Yes! Which would you like to try first?" Miharu replied in a bright voice, before picking up the knife on the table. She seemed to sense something from the faint changes in

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Liselotte's expressions.

"Thank you. Then, let's try the apple pie first," Liselotte said cheerily, pointing at the treat.

"Okay." Miharu went ahead and began to cut the apple pie cake. She placed some on Liselotte's plate and handed it to her, before asking Rio what cake he wanted to eat. She set it down for him, then finally served herself.

Liselotte used a knife and fork to divide the cake she was served into a bite-sized piece, then brought it to her mouth.

"Mm! Delicious! Is Miharu perhaps a genius at baking cakes?!" Liselotte's expression brightened. The pie crust on the surface was crispy, like a cookie, yet the inside was moist. The crust matched the sweet flavor of the apple exquisitely, creating a perfect harmony inside her mouth as she chewed.

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“It’s not that great. They actually taste the best when they’re freshly baked and still warm, but since I couldn’t give them to you right away, I chilled them as soon as they were done. I hope the crust is still crispy… Yup, it seems okay.” Miharu was relieved to see the approval of a noble and ate some of the apple pie cake herself.

“No, it really is that good. Actually, it’s good enough to sell in my guild — no, to be on my exclusive menu! I would love to try some freshly baked cakes next time, if possible?” Liselotte pleaded with a serious expression.

“Ahaha, I can’t work for you exclusively, but I’d be happy to give you something freshly made,” Miharu agreed readily. Liselotte smacked her lips each time she tried one of the cake types Miharu had prepared.

As Liselotte ate, Aria finished preparing the tea and joined the tasting. Her interest was first caught by the Mont Blanc with a mountain of cream on top, and she served it onto her plate.

“…This is a Mont Blanc, right?” Aria narrowed her eyes dubiously at the dessert on her plate. She set a marron glacé on top of the cake aside to enjoy later and took a bite of the cream first.

“…Wow, this is wonderful.” The sweetness of the chestnut permeated the flavor of the sweet cream that melted in the mouth, making Aria gaze in wonder as she voiced her thoughts. She sipped her tea, then took another bite.

“It’s less sweet than the Mont Blancs we sell in the Ricca Guild, making it less assertive in taste but still rich and moist. I feel like I can keep eating these one after another…” Aria said in admiration.

“Thank you very much. I tried to minimize the use of sugar and maximize the natural sweetness of the chestnut,” Miharu explained.

“So this refined sweetness was actually from the chestnut itself…” Aria took another bite and confirmed that taste,

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then ate the marron glacé. She closed her eyes.

"…This is a blissful taste," she muttered earnestly.

"Aria, try this one after the Mont Blanc. It's a cake we don't handle in the Ricca Guild," Liselotte giggled.

"Then, if you don't mind…" Aria bowed once and served some of the mille crepe cake onto her plate, then took a bite with a smooth and elegant motion. "…Wonderful. It's so sweet, it feels like my cheeks are melting, and yet it isn't heavy in flavor at all. The thin layers of baked batter stacked together with cream carefully pasted between… It feels like I could eat this forever. It's truly magnificent," Aria said keenly.

"Indeed," Liselotte agreed with a firm nod.

"Please, feel free to have another serving," Miharu urged, smiling bashfully.

After that, they exchanged thoughts about the cakes and held a question and answer session. It wasn't long until all cakes were sampled, leaving only half of each cake behind.

Rio and Miharu had each been satisfied with their respective slices of cheesecake and apple pie, so most of it had been demolished by Liselotte and Aria.

They do say girls have a separate stomach for sweets, I guess. Rio watched Liselotte and Aria eat in awe.

Liselotte noticed that the amount of cake had decreased quite a lot without her awareness; she sipped her tea to clear the taste from her mouth "…My apologies. It was all so delicious, but I feel like I've eaten too much."

"I am most embarrassed of my behavior." Aria also hung her head in shame, having eaten all the cakes as Miharu recommended them.

"No, I made them for the purpose of giving them to Lady Liselotte, after all. If you found them to your liking, then I'm happy to hear that," Miharu said, giggling with a smile.

"…The Ricca Guild endeavors to develop new sweets every day, but progress has stagnated without any remarkable

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developments. If it's okay for me to ask, have you had any experience learning how to cook in a specialty school, or something of the sort?" Liselotte asked seriously.

"It wasn't a specialty school, but my mother used to hold cooking classes, so I was taught a lot from a young age..." Miharu replied honestly, making Liselotte bow her head apologetically.

"I see, your mother did... I'm sorry, I must have made you remember your hometown with that question."

"No, it pains me to imagine how worried my parents must be, but I've made irreplaceable friends in this world too, and I have no complaints about my current life. It's fine," Miharu said bravely, shaking her head.

Liselotte's eyes widened. "...You're really strong, Lady Miharu," she said, observing Miharu with a distant look.

"That's not true. If I had been alone, I would have burst out crying ages ago," Miharu said with a faint smile.

"Being alone is disheartening. I've met lots of irreplaceable people in this world too. That may be the reason why I can live my current life in contentment and not be pessimistic." Liselotte placed a hand against her chest and spoke as though she was confirming it herself. Then, she glanced at Aria. Aria had a faint smile tugging at her face.

A silence fell over the room for a while. "Oh, it got a bit solemn in here. My apologies. There's one thing I wanted to ask — would Lady Miharu be willing to offer her cooking knowledge to the Ricca Guild? Preferably exclusively. Of course, we'll write up a contract and pay you an appropriate amount in compensation." Liselotte said, suddenly changing the topic. Her determination as a merchant was showing through the way she expressed how undesirable it would be for the knowledge to be offered outside of the Ricca Guild.

"If Haruto thinks it's okay, I don't mind..." Miharu's eyes widened as she looked to Rio for his opinion as her guardian.

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“…I can’t say anything without the details of the contract, and it depends on Miharu’s plans for the future, but I think it should be considered. How about we leave the negotiations until after the banquet for now? Of course, until we can have that discussion, there won’t be any contracts formed with third parties.”

Liselotte nodded with a content smile. “I have no objections to that.”

Terrific, as always. He’s quick on the uptake and even considers my side, which makes things go much smoother. After all, Rio had been the one to offer not to negotiate with third parties until they had a chance for negotiation, leaving Liselotte with nothing else to say.

“I’m okay with that too.” Miharu nodded as well.

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After the tea party with Liselotte, Rio and Miharu had some free time until they arrived in the capital of Galtuuk. Instead of heading to the guest room they were given, Rio and Miharu decided to learn about the enchanted ship they were on. First, Aria showed them all the facilities inside the ship, then headed to the deck.

“This concludes the tour of the ship. From here, you can enjoy the view of the sky as much as you like. If there is anything you require, do ask one of the nearby attendants. I will excuse myself for now.” Aria bowed respectfully and departed, leaving Rio and Miharu alone on the deck. There was no one else around, making it obvious that they were alone together. Miharu had also fallen silent.

“Shall we walk a lap around the deck for now?” Rio suggested.

“…Okay.” Miharu’s voice was slightly stiff from nerves, but she nodded with resolution. When Rio started walking, Miharu maintained a somewhat diagonal position behind

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him.

It was afternoon — while it was a little early for the sun to begin setting, it was far too late to be called lunchtime. The weather was pleasant and the sunlight shining on the enchanted ship scattered its rays onto the deck. While the ship flew at a fairly quick speed, the body of the vessel was covered in a special wind barrier sorcery, making the breeze on the deck fairly gentle.

While they walked, Rio called out to Aishia through telepathy. *Aishia, are you awake right now?*

Yup, I'm awake. What's up? she responded instantly. His voice must have reached Miharu too, as her body flinched as soon as Rio called out to Aishia. For the record, Rio and Miharu could also communicate telepathically through Aishia.

Nothing in particular, but we can't talk much when other people are around. I wanted to take this opportunity to talk, Rio explained. Part of the reason was also because he felt a little awkward with just Miharu, not knowing what to say.

Thank you for everything, Aishia. I'm always such a problem for you, Miharu added, her tone concerned.

You've been in your spirit form inside me this whole time. I hope it hasn't been too boring… has it? Rio asked, wondering if she was okay staying in her spirit form.

Yup, I'm fine. If anything, I feel the most comfortable inside Haruto, Aishia replied in her flat voice.

I'm glad to hear that, but don't hesitate to speak up when you want to come outside, Rio said with a smile.

Got it. But I'm fine for now. You two should enjoy your walk along the enchanted ship instead — the scenery is beautiful. Aishia seemed to be more interested in being considerate to the two of them. They had just arrived at the bow of the ship that overlooked the scenery before them.

Rio suddenly stopped walking. "…The view from this spot

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is probably the best," he said to Miharu while gazing out at the vast land sprawled underneath the endless sky. Valleys carved their way between the towering mountains, lakes dotted the areas that weren't covered in fields, and rivers flowed across the surface to paint the ground like a colorful canvas. Such was the beauty of nature.

"Yes, it's beautiful." Miharu stood beside Rio and gazed upon the same scenery, muttering quietly.

"It looks a little different from when I'm flying through the air with spirit arts," Rio said to fill the silence, too.

"...Yes. It's a little strange to be flying through the air with my feet on the floor. I'm normally being carried by someone." Miharu showed a hint of her natural smile as she recalled the times how she was carried by Rio, Aishia, and Orphia's contract spirit Ariel.

"Even the people of this world rarely have the chance to ride enchanted ships, so this has been a valuable experience."

Miharu nodded. "Yes. Thank you very much, Haruto," she said with a soft smile.

"...Why are you thanking me?" Rio asked, looking at her curiously.

"Because it's all thanks to you... The reason that I'm able to be here, that is."

"That's because this was what you wanted and decided on," Rio said, slightly awkward.

"You granted my wish, Haruto. I wouldn't have been able to do anything alone. I wouldn't even have been able to make my wish at all," Miharu said with a sad smile.

"It wasn't through my efforts alone, though. It was only because of your own popularity," Rio chuckled.

A troubled look appeared across Miharu's face. "Hmm... Then let me change my phrasing a little. Thank you for always helping me out, Haruto," she said with a gentle smile.

"Not at all. I'll help you as much as I can, so please don't

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hesitate to ask for anything you need," Rio said with an embarrassed nod.

"Will you do anything I ask of you?" Miharu asked nervously.

Rio mustered a somewhat guilt-ridden smile. "...Yes. If it's to help send you and the others back to Earth, I'll do anything that's within my power." He had to for a smile because — *As far as I'm aware, four years passed without Miharu ever returning to Earth.*

Indeed, at the point when Amakawa Haruto passed away, Miharu still hadn't returned to Earth yet. After turning twenty and becoming an adult, Haruto had met with his mother just once. He'd inquired as to whether or not she still had any connections to Miharu's family, and found out that she was still acquainted with them, but Miharu herself was still missing.

Incidentally, when Haruto asked how his little sister Aki had been, his mother didn't inform him that Aki was also missing. She only told him that Aki was doing well. He didn't know what she was thinking when she didn't inform him of Aki's disappearance, but as a result, Haruto remained unaware that Aki had gone missing until they reunited in this world.

At any rate, Miharu had come to this world after Haruto died, and Haruto had been reborn into this world with his previous life's memories before Miharu's arrival. Rio had yet to tell her this. If he did, he would inevitably have to tell her about his past life.

And yet, he couldn't remain silent about it forever. Would Miharu and the others really be able to return to Earth? Even if they could find a way back, what time period would it be when they arrived? Considering all those uncertainties, there was a need for Miharu to be well-informed of the situation...

At the very least, after reuniting with Satsuki and

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Takahisa and discussing their plans for the future, she would need to know by then, Rio thought.

Listening to Rio speak of returning to Earth caused a conflicted expression to appear on her face for a few moments, but she was clear with what she was thinking shortly after. "...It's not that I don't want to return to Earth. It's just... I also like my current life where I can be with everyone."

"I... see. That's good, then." Rio was looking at Miharu in slight surprise.

"Both are very important to me. I don't want to forget either of them and pretend they never happened... That's why I still want to be with everyone. I want to be with you, too. Regardless of returning to Earth and so on, that's what I want right now," Miharu stated clearly.

Rio was still looking at Miharu in surprise, feeling as though she was acting strangely more assertive and bold than usual. "...I understand. I will respect your intentions as much as possible," he said nervously.

"Promise?" Miharu stared fixedly at Rio's face in confirmation.

"Yes." Rio gave a slightly anxious smile as he replied.

Miharu sighed in relief. "Thank you very much. ...Oh, I might have said something really embarrassing right now," she said with a pang of realization and turned red.

"No, not at all," Rio replied, then directed his gaze to the person who approached.

"Umm, Sir Haruto. Do you have a moment?" The one who appeared was Liselotte's trainee attendant, Chloe.

"I'm fine. Has Lady Liselotte summoned me?" Rio asked, shaking his head in a friendly manner. He was just about to wrap up his conversation with Miharu.

"No. I was hoping you would allow me some of your time to talk, for my own personal reasons," Chloe said respectfully.

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“Your own… What is this about?” Rio cocked his head and asked Chloe.

“When Amande was being attacked by monsters, you saved not only me, but my mother and little sister too. I wanted to thank you properly for that, as well as apologize for what happened when you came to stay at my family inn several years back…” Chloe seemed to be nervous, as her voice came off quite stiff.

“Setting aside the monster attack on Amande for now, what do you mean by what happened when I stayed at your inn?” Rio questioned curiously.

“Umm, I mean when the drunk adventurers kept harassing you in the dining room and ended up picking a fight,” Chloe explained.

“Oh, that incident? You had nothing to do with it, no?” Rio laughed it off lightly.

“That’s not true. I was so scared, I couldn’t do anything. I even ended up afraid of you, even though you were the victim at the time, which was very rude of me. You departed first thing the next morning, and I’ve always wanted to apologize ever since… I’m truly, very sorry!” The more she spoke, the more clearly Chloe seemed to recall her emotions at the time. She bowed her head deeply at Rio.

“It’s fine, I had already forgotten myself, so don’t let it bother you,” Rio reasoned with a gentle smile.

“But I still feel so bad about it…” Chloe continued to bow her head in shame.

Rio got the impression that she was very sincere and decided to encourage her. “…I understand. Then I’ll accept your apologies in earnest. Now, please lift your head,” he said, eyebrows knit.

“Yes, thank you very much.” Chloe slowly raised her head.

“Umm, shall I step away for a minute? If you have anything else to discuss…” Miharu, who had been watching the two of them silently until now, offered to leave the two of

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them alone out of consideration. She was curious about what kind of past Rio had, but she figured it would be awkward for her to stay if they had anything more to discuss.

"No, I have to return to work now, so I'll excuse myself here! Please, the two of you should continue to enjoy your time in peace!" As a guest, Miharu shouldn't be the one inconvenienced, Chloe concluded. She shook her head in a fluster and thanked Rio once more for her mother and sister before departing.

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Several hours later, the enchanted ship finally reached the capital of Galtuuk, and it slowly descended towards the lake to the east of the city. As the distance between the lake and the ship gradually closed, the captain's voice yelled through the pipe speakers. "All hands prepare for splashdown!" After a moment, the enchanted ship landed on the water, splashing waves around the area.

Afterward, the vessel traveled along the water to dock at the harbor, where the ship crew and harbor crew worked together to begin disembarking preparations. A rope was flung to attach the ship to the harbor, and a ramp was immediately installed to allow its passengers to debark.

The ship captain and crew finished their work at lightning speed. "Lady Liselotte, disembarking preparations are complete!" they reported to Liselotte, who was waiting on the deck.

"Thank you, captain, and to all of the hardworking people on the crew. Please maintain the ship until it is time to return to Amande. Meanwhile, you are free to enjoy the capital as you please," Liselotte said amicably, satisfied with their rapid work pace.

"Y'all heard that, right?! If you want your time off, ya better get your asses to work and finish the inspections!"

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said the ship's captain, spurring the crew into action.

"Yeah!" the crew replied energetically, scattering off to work. Liselotte saw them off with a warm smile before turning to prompt Rio and Miharu off the ship.

"Now, Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu. The preparations are done, so please come this way."

"Right. Thank you for taking us here," Rio said, and started walking to disembark from the ship, with Miharu following suit. Liselotte also walked with them, while the four attendant ladies — Aria, Cosette, Natalie and Chloe — escorted them as bodyguards.

Once they reached the dock, a middle-aged man stepped forward from the workers and approached them. His muscular and brawny build implied his military skills were not to be underestimated, but despite having a sword at his waist, his outfit was that of a butler instead of a soldier.

"Lady Liselotte, it has been a while," the man said respectfully.

"Oh, Ricardo. Thank you for coming to welcome us. I know I gave notice of our arrival in advance, but you didn't have to come to greet me yourself…" Liselotte's eyes widened as she recognized the man. It was probably a servant from the Duke Cretia family, Rio assumed.

"It was Sir Cedric and Lady Julianne's orders. A proper welcome must be given to Sir Haruto, who saved Lady Liselotte's life, and Lady Miharu, our most important guest," Ricardo said, looking at Rio and Miharu standing beside Liselotte. Rio bowed when their eyes met, and Miharu did the same.

"Father and Mother… I see." Liselotte seemed appreciative of her parents' arrangement and smiled.

"The two of them are eagerly waiting to meet Sir Haruto and Lady Miharu. I would love to lead you to the main estate of the Cretia family immediately, but if it isn't too rude of me to ask, may I be given the honor of being introduced?"

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Ricardo asked, speaking in a subdued voice.

"Of course. Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu, this man is a butler of the Duke Cretia family who is serving my father Cedric. His name is Ricardo." He was the butler who was in charge of leading all the servants who served the house, the closest aide of the master of the house. In other words, he was given comprehensive authority as the right-hand man. While his position was technically that of a servant, as the head butler, there was no doubt his origins were from nobility as well. Because someone as important as Ricardo had come to retrieve their guests directly, it was proof that Liselotte's father, Cedric, did not take Rio's presence lightly by any means.

"Is that so? My name is Haruto, and this is Miharu Ayase. We have arrived in this land thanks to Lady Liselotte's exceptional arrangements. We are exceptionally grateful to receive a direct welcome from you, Sir Ricardo," Rio said courteously. Miharu bowed her head politely when Rio introduced her.

"Why, thank you. As introduced, I am Ricardo. To you, Sir Haruto, I would like to offer my deepest gratitude for saving the young Lady Liselotte during her crisis. I have also heard about Lady Miharu's situation. Now, please, allow me to show you the mansion. A carriage has been prepared, just this way." Ricardo had an amicable smile on his face as he returned the greeting, then began leading the way without any further conversation.

Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte followed him. They were silently accompanied by Aria, Cosette, Natalie and Chloe.

"Come to think of it, are Pascal and George here too?" Liselotte suddenly asked Ricardo. Pascal and George were Liselotte's elder brothers.

"Sir Pascal is unfortunately absent, but Sir George has gone to visit his fiancée Lady Colette's family home. You should be able to meet them at the banquet."

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“I see. It’s unfortunate that Pascal won’t be there, but so be it. Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu. My brothers are not present tonight, so I will be introducing you to just my parents. It sounds like they’re quite eager to meet you two.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Rio and Miharu. As they conversed, they arrived at the carriage waiting by the harbor. Once they boarded, they headed for the main estate of the Duke Cretia family. The two carriages that Rio’s party and the attendants were on rattled their wheels as they moved.

The Duke Cretia estate in the capital city was in the noble district near the enchanted ship harbor. A main street stretched directly from the harbor to the royal castle, and the noble district sat in between. The area also had military related facilities at every turn, keeping the noble district protected under strict security. While the area was quiet, patrolling soldiers could be seen walking everywhere.

Several minutes of travel later, the carriage arrived at the section of the noble district that was closest to the royal castle.

“We’ve arrived at the gate,” Ricardo announced to the carriage from where he sat beside the driver.

“Then please prepare to disembark,” Liselotte prompted, but Rio and Miharu’s belongings were being managed by Aria and the attendants, so they didn’t have anything to prepare. All Rio had was his sword.

The carriage soon passed through an ornately decorated iron gate and entered the estate grounds. They alighted from the carriage before the mansion.

“Wow, what a beautiful estate…” When Miharu stepped down from the carriage with Rio’s assistance, she gazed in wonder at the grand view of the Duke Cretia estate before her. An enormous building composed of stark white walls towered before them. There was also a well-maintained flat-geometric garden on the premises, putting the gate a fair distance from the mansion.

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“Hehe, thank you for the compliment. It’s a little too unsettling to reside in, but it’s been an ancient custom in the capital to build a befitting mansion in order to show our pride for our family’s power. One of the annoying aspects of noble society,” Liselotte said with a wry smile.

“The sun has already set today, but you may explore the gardens as much as you wish tomorrow. For now, please come this way. Dinner is ready,” Ricardo said, inviting them inside the mansion.

From the moment they stepped inside, the interior’s decorations showed off its highly artistic atmosphere. Miharu felt like she had wandered into a palace, which made her nervous. Rio was gazing at the engraved designs of the interior with interest.

Thus, Rio and Miharu were first led to the guest room. The door opened to reveal a wide living space before them.

“This is the key to the guest room — please use this room tonight. There are two bedrooms. Both are installed with their own locks from the inside,” Ricardo explained, handing Rio a key. The rooms were styled like a hotel.

“Thank you for preparing such wonderful rooms,” Rio said with a polite bow as he accepted the key.

“A servant will come in roughly 20 minutes to come get you, so please organize your belongings and wait here. Do you have any questions so far?” asked Ricardo.

“What is the dress code?” Rio asked.

“There is nothing wrong with what you’re wearing right now, so not to worry,” Ricardo said with a warm smile.

“Thank you very much.”

“Bring in Sir Haruto and Lady Miharu’s belongings,” Liselotte ordered Natalie and Cosette.

“Understood.” The two carefully carried Rio and Miharu’s bags into the living room.

“Oh, that’s right. As a token of gratitude for being invited to the estate, I brought a gift for your parents. Will you

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accept it?” Rio offered.

“Why, you shouldn’t have. Just your words would have been enough,” Liselotte said a little apologetically.

“The gift is a special alcohol. There may be similar liquor in some regions, but I don’t believe you’ll find this taste in circulation around the surrounding kingdoms here, at least.”

“A special alcohol, you say?” Liselotte perked up. If it was something that wasn’t available in the Strahl region, then she couldn’t pass that up as the head of the Ricca Guild.

“You can try it yourself, if you so please. I have it on the authority of an acquaintance that it is quite an excellent item.” Rio didn’t elaborate further, but smiled cheekily instead. The alcohol he had brought was one of his own creations from the knowledge he gained in the spirit folk village and the Yagumo region, but its taste was tested and approved of by Celia, so Liselotte should be satisfied.

“...In that case, could we try it at the dinner after this?” It seemed like Liselotte wanted to drink it as soon as possible.

“Of course. There are several types that I’ve prepared, so I’ll select one that goes well with the dinner menu.” Rio nodded as he moved to his bag and opened it, then took out a cloth bag with three stylishly-designed bottles inside.

“...Those containers are lovely. The embroidery on the bag is adorable too,” Liselotte mumbled with interest. She had dealt with many high-quality liquors through her work before, but she had never seen a design such as this.

“Thank you very much. The truth is, I made both the bottle and the alcohol using the knowledge I gained from acquaintances. Miharu made the bag, too,” Rio explained, then placed the bottles back in the bag.

“Why, is that true?” Liselotte was amazed. At the very least, no amateur could have done such a thing.

“Yes — please accept this.” Rio held the bag with the three bottles out and approached Liselotte.

“Then I shall graciously accept your gift.” Liselotte bowed

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and took the bag from Rio. Aria stepped forward and received it from Liselotte to carry.

“Now, Lady Liselotte, if you’d come this way.” Ricardo placed a hand over his chest.

“Well then, Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu. I have preparations to attend to, so I will excuse myself here. I shall see you again later,” Liselotte said with a grin, leaving the room with Ricardo and the attendant ladies.

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After that, Rio parted ways with Miharu and went into one of the bedrooms, where he removed his sword and armor. He wasn’t prohibited from being armed as a guest on the estate, but wearing a sword to dinner didn’t really show good manners.

He was wearing proper clothes already, and had been told there was no need to change into anything, so his preparations for dinner were complete, other than washing his hands and rinsing his mouth. Rio finished up in the bathroom and wandered back to the living room to sit down. Shortly afterward, Miharu appeared in the living room, having finished her own preparations.

“Sorry for the wait, Haruto.”

According to Ricardo, someone would be there to pick them up soon, so there most likely wasn’t any time to pour some tea and relax. In reality, no sooner had they confirmed their plans with Aishia through telepathy, a female servant arrived to pick them up.

“Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu, I have come to escort you to dinner. Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes, thank you for coming for us,” Rio said with a smile. The servant in the maid outfit led Rio and Miharu to the dining room. The space was of a truly extravagant layout. The interior was furnished with antique furniture and the

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large stained glass window colored the room.

Furthermore, Liselotte and her parents were already seated and waiting inside. When Rio and Miharu appeared, the three of them all stood up at once. At the same time, Ricardo and the other servants of the house were quietly waiting by the wall. Liselotte's attendant, Aria, was included among them.

"Thank you for coming today, Haruto, Miharu. Welcome to the Duke Cretia family residence in the capital. I'd like to extend my warmest welcome to you. I am Liselotte's father, Cedric Cretia." Cedric welcomed Rio and Miharu with a friendly and sociable tone. He was in his mid-forties, but he had a youthful handsomeness to him that seemed fitting as Liselotte's father.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Haruto. Thank you very much for inviting us on this occasion." Rio said respectfully, then placed his right hand over his chest.

"I'm Miharu Ayase. Thank you very much for everything today." Miharu copied Rio and greeted him nervously too.

"I've heard a lot about the two of you from Liselotte. Firstly, Haruto: thank you for saving Liselotte in Amande. If you hadn't been there, the damage would have been unrecoverable. On behalf of the Duke Cretia estate, I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart," Cedric said, bowing his head deeply.

"No, it was an action I took for my own benefit as well." Rio shook his head with slight discomfort. It was the undeniable truth that he had acted out of the calculative plan to make Liselotte indebted to him for the sake of Miharu's future, and his fight with Lucius had been a personal grudge.

"Hahaha. Even so, the fact of the matter is, you saved my beloved Liselotte. As long as your intent wasn't to do my daughter wrong, the reasons for your actions are not an issue." Cedric laughed heartily. As expected of a duke, he

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was a friendly and open-hearted person.

"Thank you," Rio bowed his head deeply.

"Now, you two are the main guests tonight. Please have a seat. We have prepared this modest dinner with gratitude," Cedric said.

Ricardo and Aria quietly walked over to them. "Please have a seat," the two said, pulling the chairs out for them.

"Thank you very much," Rio nodded, sitting down in the chair. Miharu also sat down nervously in the chair Aria pulled out for her. The Cretia family also sat down on the chairs pulled out by their other servants.

"Darling, I'd like to greet the two of them too. Introduce me," the woman seated beside Cedric said. She was Cedric's wife and Liselotte's mother, Julianne. Julianne had been watching their exchange with a grin, happy about something as she watched Rio and Miharu.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Julianne. Haruto, Miharu, allow me to introduce you to my wife and Liselotte's mother, Julianne." Cedric smiled warmly.

"Hehe, good evening. I'm Julianne Cretia. I hope the two of you find your stay here pleasant." Julianne chuckled as she spoke to Rio and Miharu. As Liselotte's mother, she had the same clear sky blue hair as her daughter, with deep blue eyes and an extremely gentle-looking face. There was no clear indication of her age, but she was young enough to be mistaken for Liselotte's sister to an outsider.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Haruto. I am embarrassed to admit I nearly mistook you for Lady Liselotte's elder sister," Rio said with a smile.

"Oh, you flatter me." Julianne smiled bashfully, a faint blush on her cheeks.

"Hahaha, isn't that right? Julianne is a beauty," Cedric agreed with a cheerful smile.

"Oh stop, darling..." Julianne placed a hand against her cheek and turned away from Cedric in embarrassment. The

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gesture was quite elegant and suited her well.

The couple were as innocent as newlyweds. Rio and Miharu watched them pleasantly.

“My apologies, Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu. The two of them are always like this. Embarrassing to witness and so close, there’s practically no space for me between them,” Liselotte said to Rio and Miharu with a strained smile.

“I think it’s wonderful for a couple to have a harmonious relationship.” Rio said with a smile.

“Yes, I’m envious of their relationship,” Miharu agreed with a gentle smile.

“Oh? You think so too? It looks like we’ll get along well, then. Appetizers will be brought in soon, but let’s have a drink first. A toast to this wonderful meeting. Why, this is just a dinner between close friends, so there’s no need for any of that stiff language,” Cedric rejoiced happily.

“Do you drink alcohol, Lady Miharu?” Liselotte asked.

Due to the laws in Japan, minors like Miharu were not allowed to drink alcohol, but there were no such laws in this world. Or rather, people were treated as adults from the age of fifteen, so there was no problem for Miharu to drink here.

That being said, as someone born and raised in Japan, whether Miharu would drink alcohol or not was another matter, so Liselotte had been considerate by asking.

“I barely drink at all, but if it’s just for the first toast…” Miharu replied. Though it was a world where the intake of alcohol wasn’t forbidden, she still felt a bit wary towards drinking. At the same time, she didn’t want to ruin the atmosphere of their dinner.

In reality, she had drunk several times in similar situations at the spirit folk village already. She didn’t have a high tolerance, but getting drunk wouldn’t be a problem if she didn’t drink glass after glass.

“There are drink options without alcohol, so I’ll have that prepared for you afterward. That’s right — I’m also very

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interested in the alcohol Sir Haruto gifted us…” Liselotte noted.

“You may drink it as an accompaniment to the meal, but there is an alcohol that would suit an aperitif too,” said Rio. Cedric was listening in with great interest.

“Then, could we have you select that one for us?”

“Sure.”

“Aria, bring the alcohol from earlier,” Liselotte called out to Aria who was waiting by the wall.

“Understood,” Aria nodded, bringing the bag of bottles from the serving table over to the dining table. The bottles inside each had their own color; there was a blue, red, and white one.

“The blue bottle would best suit an aperitif. The acidity helps stimulate the appetite,” Rio said.

“Then I shall have that one,” Liselotte decided.

“How interesting. I wish to try that one, too.”

“Then, me too.”

There were other aperitifs available, but Cedric and Julianne immediately decided on the same alcohol. Since that was the case, Rio and Miharu settled on the same as well.

“Allow me to pour it.” Aria grasped the blue bottle with familiar movements, pouring it into a metal glass. Once the alcohol had been poured out for everyone, Liselotte and her parents peered inside the goblet with great interest.

“It looks similar to beer in appearance, but this scent is… apple?” Liselotte analyzed the alcohol based on appearance and smell. The glass was filled with a clear liquid similar in color to beer without foam, the sharp scent similar to an apple’s acidity rather than sweetness.

“Yes, it is as you have guessed,” Rio nodded.

“I look forward to the taste. Shall we have the toast now? Does everyone have their glasses ready?” Cedric urged, eager to drink the alcohol. Everyone at the table took their glasses

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in their hands and awaited Cedric's next words.

"To commemorate this wonderful new meeting — cheers!" Cedric announced.

"Cheers!" Everyone raised their glasses before bringing it to their mouths. Rio was curious about the reaction to his creation and promptly turned his gaze to Liselotte and her parents.

"...Delicious!" Liselotte's eyes were wide with shock. The appearance was similar to foamless beer, but its taste was closer to an expensive white wine.

It was less sweet and alcoholic than wine, making it an easier taste in the mouth. There was also the acidity of the apple that truly stimulated appetite.

"There certainly is an acidity to it, but it's very easy to drink. The sweetness of the apple is gone, but that's precisely what makes it perfect as an aperitif. It leaves a wonderful taste in the mouth," Cedric commended openly.

"Indeed, I could drink many glasses of this. It would suit the meal too, which leaves me in a pickle. I'm not very tolerant of alcohol..." Julianne said, having also greatly enjoyed the taste and scent of the drink.

"I'm glad to hear it was to your liking." Rio's lips turned upwards in relief.

"I've rarely encountered such good alcohol before. Where did you obtain this?" Cedric asked curiously.

"Father, this alcohol was made by Sir Haruto himself," Liselotte said.

"What? This is your creation? The quality is more than enough to be sold as a high-class spirit..." Cedric's eyes widened in surprise.

Rio shook his head slowly. "The ingredients didn't cost all that much, and it's not that hard to make, either. There are two other bottles to try, so please feel free to compare the taste."

"Hahaha, it looks like I have one more thing to enjoy

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during this dinner.” Cedric laughed heartily.

Is this something he made with his knowledge from his previous life too? If so, perhaps Sir Haruto’s family home was some kind of brewery… At any rate, I’ll have to negotiate with him to gain this alcohol’s production method along with Lady Miharu’s cakes. A fire was quietly lit within Liselotte’s merchant soul.

“Oh? Now that you’ve introduced us to such a wonderful alcohol, it looks like Liselotte’s thinking about selling it as a product in the Ricca Guild.” As her father, Cedric saw through what Liselotte was thinking right away, and he changed the topic cheerfully.

“…Oh, Father.” Liselotte’s cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

“If you’d like, I’d be open to negotiations just like Miharu’s cakes,” Rio said with a chuckle.

“Would you really? I would love to discuss it further!” Liselotte nodded happily. The appetizers were brought in from the kitchen and placed on the table, and dinner was set to begin.

As dinner commenced, Cedric led the conversation skillfully, helping create a consistently warm atmosphere full of laughter. Julianna laughed heartily, luring Miharu and Liselotte into laughing as well, which Rio watched with a peaceful smile on his face. Miharu also found the alcohol to be delicious, continuing to drink many glasses with Julianne and Liselotte despite saying she would only have one. On the other hand, Rio accompanied Cedric in drinking several glasses.

“Liselotte is a kind and considerate child just like Julianne, but at the same time, she’s grown up to be a strong-willed woman, unlike Julianne.” The alcohol eventually circulated in Cedric’s system, making him feel uplifted as he began talking about Liselotte.

“F-Father?” Taken aback, Liselotte looked to her father in

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a fluster. However, Cedric was grinning as he continued talking to Rio and Miharu seated opposite him.

“To live as a noble, you cannot ignore this thing called personal connections. You understand this, right?”

“Yes, I am aware.” Rio nodded without hesitation.

“Connections from house to house. In other words, marriage is the best method of forming those personal connections. Marriage is a difficult social phenomenon for nobles to avoid, for the sake of continuing their family line and for the sake of creating personal connections. That’s why nobles have political marriages. They also have arranged marriage interviews for them… Even if the people involved do not want to,” Cedric said, a somewhat troubled smile on his face.

“Liselotte wasn’t an exception to that either. As a duke family, many marriage proposals came from other families. From a very young age, too. In reality, most of them were just introductions, but with how important harmonious relationships are in a noble society, it would have been a poor move to refuse them all,” Cedric explained to a silently listening Rio and Miharu.

“As you can see, Liselotte isn’t exactly hard on the eyes, either. With her good looks, many families came forth with proposals for marriage interviews. Of course, it was difficult to accept them all, so we only chose the ones that were hard to reject and had Liselotte meet them,” Cedric concluded with a nostalgic smile on his face.

“Geez…” Liselotte looked like she wanted to object to Cedric, but at the same time, she was exceedingly aware of Rio and Miharu and blushed red with embarrassment. Julianne was watching her daughter with a pleased smile.

“I believe it was when she was seven years old. After her first marriage interview, and then several more after that, Liselotte came into my office to talk to me. ‘If I graduate early from the secondary division of the royal academy, I

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want you to listen to my requests,' she said."

"F-Father, perhaps you could stop there..." Liselotte had ascertained what her father was trying to talk about and attempted to change the topic with a twitching smile. However, with the guests right in front of her, she couldn't be too pushy with him.

Julianne stopped Liselotte with a charming smile, after which Liselotte backed down with a small sigh. "There's no need for that, dear. It's the perfect opportunity to have Haruto and Miharu know how wonderful you are."

Cedric huffed with laughter as he gazed upon his beloved daughter. "Liselotte was only seven years old at the time, but I felt something bloodcurdling from her. I wondered what the reason was for such behavior, so I asked her to explain. Do you know what she said in response?" he asked Rio and Miharu with true delight.

Rio exchanged a glance with Miharu beside him before taking a stab at it. "Based on the story so far, did it have something to do with arranged marriages?"

"Exactly. Liselotte said this, sharply and tersely: 'Father, I do not wish to enter an arranged marriage with a partner I do not desire. I wish to choose who to marry myself. That is why I wish to obtain enough power to decide who I want to marry myself.' And so, in order to do that, she requested assistance in establishing the Ricca Guild, as well as entrusting her the management of part of my territory. Have I mentioned that she was seven years old during this?" Cedric nodded firmly, holding back his laughter as he chatted away with enthusiasm.

"So she was already exceptionally intelligent at that age." Rio chuckled, looking at Liselotte.

"Can you understand how I felt, seeing my own daughter so strong-willed and brave in spirit? At that time, I nodded without even thinking twice. Then, she wrote her innovative thesis at the age of ten and graduated from the Galarc

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Kingdom's Royal Academy in a matter of a few years. Even I was surprised at her level of intelligence." Cedric looked at Liselotte with an earnestly proud expression.

Ugh, that's my dark history. But it couldn't be helped! I was only seven years old, and old men in their thirties and forties were asking for my hand in marriage. At the time, I was already so busy trying to learn the basic knowledge of this world, and all I felt was cold and bitter fear. Liselotte remembered the past and blushed an intense red.

"That's why I entrusted Amande to her and had her obtain her independence as the president of the Ricca Guild, but living apart every day leaves me worried. Just the other day, Amande was attacked by swarms of monsters, no? I've heard things about a man called Lucius leading a mercenary group behind it all, and the appearance of dragon-like creatures," Cedric lamented, his tone sad as he spoke. Then he sat up straight and turned to Rio.

"I heard that you are an extraordinary swordsman. Liselotte has said you are exceptionally trustworthy as well. After actually meeting you like this, the impression I received is exactly as Liselotte said."

"I am not worthy of those words." Rio bowed humbly.

"Miharu is also a humble and polite, charming and wonderful young lady. I don't mean to make you feel wary, but I have a small request for the two of you."

"What do you mean?" Rio tilted his head and gestured for him to continue.

"Due to her age and job, my daughter has very few same-aged friends she can be honest with. There are many who idolize her for her overflowing wisdom, but there are many who don't feel comfortable because of that. That's why, if you two don't mind, could you continue to be her friends in the future?" Cedric said, bowing his head deeply at Rio and Miharu.

"...Of course, if Lady Liselotte also wishes for that."

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“I would be delighted to as well.”

Rio and Miharu both nodded with a smile.

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear that. Now, today is a good chance for you to get to know Liselotte better. She did say such an extravagant thing at seven years old, after all… There are still many more heroic tales to be told of her, so do lend me your ears.” A grin appeared on Cedric’s face as he glanced at Liselotte mischievously.

Even Liselotte could no longer sit by idly and objected. “Please stop teasing me any further, Father!”

“Hahaha, I’ve angered her. That being said, when compared to my seven-year-old self that had no visions of the future, Liselotte just seems so capable. It’s a parent’s duty to brag about their child. Julianne thinks the same way, I’m sure.” Cedric laughed breezily, flattering his beloved wife.

“No no, even when I was seven, all I cared about was growing flowers. It never even crossed my mind to carve my own path in life. I’m sure her intelligence comes from you,” Julianne said happily, giggling to herself.

“I’m sorry, Sir Haruto, Lady Miharu. These two will brag at any chance they get.” Liselotte sighed.

“No, I think it’s wonderful that they’re so close,” Miharu said cheerfully, shaking her head.

“Thank you. Speaking of which, what kind of child were you like at seven years old, Miharu?” Julianne suddenly asked.

“Me? When I was seven…” Miharu’s eyes widened as she recalled when she was seven. She had been seven years old just after she became separated from Haruto. The clearest memory in her mind even now was her farewell with Haruto.

“I wanted to get married to my childhood friend, who was separated from me. We promised to marry each other when we parted ways, so I learned how to cook many kinds of food…” Miharu sent a sidelong glance at Rio to judge his

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expression as she talked. For a moment, Rio's face had stiffened, so slightly that even Miharu couldn't see it. However, he immediately put up a friendly facade to cover his emotions.

"My, that's lovely. How do you feel about that boy now, I wonder?" Julianne's eyes were sparkling as she questioned Miharu.

"Huh? U-Umm, we haven't reunited since then, but I've always remembered him, and the memory is still precious to me even now..." The sudden question caught Miharu off guard, making her blush as she answered nervously.

"A precious memory...?" Julianne excitedly urged Miharu to continue. Cedric was watching Miharu warmly, while Liselotte was also listening in with interest.

Miharu placed a hand over her chest and took a deep breath. "...Even when I sometimes remembered him out of the blue, I wasn't confident whether those feelings were still out of love. But recently, I finally realized it... That I still consider him precious to me and love him even now."

"Oh my!" Julianne was ecstatic to hear the answer she was hoping for, covering her mouth as she rejoiced.

"A-Ahaha, it looks like I'm a little drunk." Miharu shot another glance at Rio's face beside her before she was unable to bear the feelings of embarrassment. She hung her head, blushing bright red.

Rio had a somewhat awkward smile fixed on his face.

"Hehe, I see. Your face is scarlet, after all. But it's a wonderful story. If only Liselotte could also experience a love as wonderful as that," Julianne said to Miharu with a merry voice, changing the topic to her beloved daughter.

"M-Must you bring me up at a time like this?" Liselotte's face twitched at the unexpected change in conversation.

"I feel like it's still a little too early for Liselotte to fall in love..." Cedric expressed his disapproval with a stern look, showing his overprotective side.

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“Oh? Who was it that passionately pursued my hand in marriage when I was fifteen years old again, I wonder?” Julianne looked at Cedric with cute indignation.

“Hahaha, I wonder who?” Cedric shamelessly laughed it off, feigning ignorance.

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Chapter 3: Sumeragi Satsuki

The next day, after their lunch at the mansion, Liselotte brought Rio and Miharu along to visit the royal castle of Galarc. Their goal was, of course, to meet Satsuki before the banquet.

Under normal circumstances, the two of them would have never been allowed inside, but thanks to Liselotte filling out the necessary procedures required at the castle gate, both Rio and Miharu were permitted to enter without investigation.

Once they entered the castle, Liselotte gave a note to one of the castle officials addressed to the king— it requested an urgent audience with King Francois of Galarc. Nobles had the privilege of seeking an audience with the king at any time as long as they had a good reason, and she had exercised that privilege. In some cases, they could be made to wait a month, but this time the official came back with the response that the king could meet them immediately.

However, the information to be discussed must have been deemed to be highly confidential, as they were to use a royal reception room for an unofficial meeting rather than the audience hall for an official one.

Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte were led to the reception room, and Francois soon appeared. Francois was in his late forties, the age where a king was at his pudgiest. His gaze and countenance were stern—typical for a king of great power.

Sandwiching Francois on each side stood a man in his early twenties and a woman in her early teens. They both wore expensive-looking clothes which, combined with their accompanying Francois, implied that they were both royalty.

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Other attendants wearing maid uniforms made an entrance as well.

“Thank you for coming today. I haven’t met Liselotte face-to-face since I received the report about the attack on Amande. I believed the next time we would meet would be at the banquet, but…” Francois looked at Miharu and Rio. They did not speak, only accepted Francois’ gaze silently while looking down.

“Pardon me. It is a delight to be before Your Majesty. I sincerely apologize for requesting this sudden audience during a time when Your Majesty must be terribly busy with the preparations for the banquet tomorrow. And I am most grateful for your immediate response to my request,” Liselotte said, giving a reverent greeting on behalf of Rio and Miharu.

“It’s not a problem. Even if you had given more advance warning, it wouldn’t have made this any easier to respond to. By bringing the actual person here, you’ve omitted the unnecessary steps in between. Above all, you are very busy yourself. At any rate, let’s all have a seat,” Francois said warmly, then sat down at the head seat. The young man and woman accompanying him sat down on chairs placed in the corner of the room.

“Excuse me.” Liselotte bowed her head and sat down gracefully. Rio and Miharu also bowed once before taking their seats on either side of Liselotte. In contrast to Miharu, whose movements were awkward from nervousness, Rio straightened himself with a downcast look like a noble would.

“…Is this person Miharu? The one who claims to be Satsuki’s friend?” Francois asked.

“This is Sir Haruto. He placed Miharu under his protection when she wandered into this world and requested that I arrange a way for Lady Satsuki to meet her. Furthermore, he assisted in repelling monsters during the

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attack on Amande, and rescued Princess Flora when she was abducted," Liselotte explained.

Francois' eyes widened in interest. "I see, so he's the enchanted swordsman you mentioned from that incident. I've heard of your achievements. You have done your duty well, both with Miharu and the rest. You may raise your head." In effect, Francois was giving Rio permission to speak to him.

Despite the fact that this was an unofficial meeting, with the other party being the leader of an entire kingdom, stricter rules of etiquette had to be followed than with other nobles. This was why Rio had not lifted his gaze to look directly at Francois' face. If Rio had joined in on Francois and Liselotte's conversation, he would have been branded as impolite.

However, once Rio was given permission to speak, he finally opened his mouth. "There is no higher honor than to receive words of praise from Your Majesty." He raised his head slightly so that Francois could see his face, before lowering it once more.

"It was noted in the report as well, but you really do seem young. To repel a large demi-dragon's breath with an enchanted sword at that age is quite the feat. I've heard that your parents were migrants, but you seem capable of upholding noble etiquette too. What an interesting boy. I would like to hear more about you later." Francois looked at Rio with great interest. The man and woman in the corner of the room also observed Rio with curiosity in their eyes.

"It would be an honor." Rio refrained from saying anything more and lowered his head respectfully. Just then, someone knocked on the door to the room before opening it immediately.

"Excuse me." A girl in her mid teens appeared. She wore what would have been a typical uniform for female knights in this world, only tailored to be more extravagant. However,

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her facial structure was that of a Japanese person.

She had large eyes and a dignified gaze. Her figure was feminine and slender, and her long hair, which reached down her back, was tied. She was beautiful.

The girl seemed to have run here, as she was slightly out of breath. However, she paid it no mind as she looked around the room anxiously, immediately focusing her gaze on Miharu.

"...Miharu-chan!" the girl — Sumeragi Satsuki — shouted after she'd caught her breath. She'd spoken in Japanese.

"Satsuki-san!" Miharu shot straight to her feet as her face lit up at the sight of her friend. Because Satsuki had spoken in Japanese, Miharu did, too.

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“Aah, I knew it. You’re in this world too! I’m so glad! Though I don’t know if that’s a happy thing… But, I’m relieved. I’m so relieved to see you in this world, Miharu!” Satsuki ran up to Miharu and hugged her tightly; she must have been battling loneliness and anxiety at being the only one summoned into this world. She wore her relief on her sleeve.

“I’m so glad to see you too, Satsuki!” Miharu allowed Satsuki to hug her as she pleased, returning the hug with a tight squeeze.

“Oh goodness, I have so much I want to tell you about. Where should I begin? I used to think all the time about what I would say if I ever saw you guys again… But now that it’s actually come true, my whole head is blank and I can’t figure out what to say.” Satsuki’s eyes were brimming with tears as she beamed with happiness.

“I also had tons of things I was planning on telling you once we met again, but I don’t know where to start,” Miharu agreed with a giggle. Meanwhile, Francois and the others were watching Satsuki and Miharu as though they were witnessing something very odd unfolding.

Satsuki suddenly noticed that she was being watched by everyone and stepped back from hugging Miharu. She looked at Francois. *“…Umm, is something the matter?”*

“No, I knew the divine arms had some kind of translation sorcery placed on you, but it’s strange hearing it when you’re having a conversation like this. I can understand everything you’re saying, but the words coming from Miharu are beyond my comprehension,” Francois explained with a wry smile.

“Oh, I see. …Wait, huh? Miharu, aren’t you a hero too?” When Satsuki realized that Miharu’s words weren’t being translated into the world’s language, her eyes widened.

“No, I don’t think I am. I don’t have one of those divine arms things.”

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“Then how do you normally communicate with people?”

“I learned to speak the language of the Strahl region, but only the common tongue,” Miharu replied.

“L-Learned to speak… It’s only been a few months since we came to this world, right? You learned in such a short time… and by yourself?” Satsuki confirmed as though she couldn’t believe it. It would be one thing if Miharu had a tutor, but she doubted it was possible to acquire a whole language alone.

“Umm, Haruto has an ancient magic artifact that can let people communicate just like your divine arms. I used that to learn enough words to be comfortable with conversational speech.” Miharu looked at Rio as she gave the answer they prepared in advance.

The truth was that Rio had memories of his previous life and knew Japanese, making it so he could teach her the language, but it was too absurd of a story for anyone to believe, and Rio himself didn’t want the story spread around. If it weren’t for Miharu’s situation, he wouldn’t have told Liselotte about himself, either.

For the record, Liselotte knew of the situation and was of course aware that Miharu’s explanation had been a lie, having agreed to the false explanation too. There was already a precedent of translation sorcery in the divine arms, so the explanation of there being ancient artifacts that could enable communication wasn’t too far fetched.

“So, such an artifact existed… Oh, is this Haruto, then?” Satsuki gazed at Rio in wonder.

“Yes. He saved me after I wandered into this world and was at a loss for where to go,” Miharu nodded.

“Haruto…” Satsuki muttered Rio’s alias and stared at his face closely.

“…What are you talking about?” Francois interrupted. While he could hear Satsuki’s half of the conversation, he seemed to have an interest in Miharu’s answer.

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“Umm, can I share what you said just now?” Satsuki asked Miharu.

“Yes, of course,” Miharu nodded without hesitation.

“We were talking about how Miharu learned to speak this world’s language in such a short period of time. Apparently, there was an ancient artifact that allowed for communication, so she used that to learn,” Satsuki told Francois.

“Oh? I’ve never heard of such an item…” Francois looked at Rio with interest.

“However, we used that artifact too much while we were studying and broke it…” Miharu added timidly to the explanation they had prepared. She had been told that ancient magic artifacts were difficult to reproduce using modern sorcery, so it would be easy enough to use it as an excuse without someone prying, but she was still nervous someone would see through her lies.

That being said, she couldn’t allow Rio’s secret to be known because of her, so she did her best to calm down and took small, nervous breaths.

“Unfortunately, it couldn’t withstand the excessive use and broke, it seems.” Satsuki interpreted Miharu’s words for Francois. Well, Satsuki was actually speaking Japanese too, but for Francois and the others, it sounded like it was being translated into the world’s language.

“Haruto, do you still have the broken artifact?” Francois asked Rio directly.

“It was a memento from my parents, so yes… However, the magic orb core with the spell formula embedded inside was overloaded and broke into pieces. It’s beyond repair,” Rio answered without hesitation.

Magic orbs were different from magic stones in that the magic energy could be replenished once it was used up, making it the equivalent of the spirit folk’s spirit stones. They were impossible for modern humans to refine, so it was

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the perfect excuse.

"...I'm a bit curious. If you can understand both Japanese and the language of this world, what do my words sound like to you right now?" Satsuki suddenly asked.

"It sounds like Japanese. But when I focus on listening for this world's language, I can hear the words as this world's... It feels really strange to hear you change languages so suddenly..." Miharu said with a strained smile.

"Hmm. Well, I don't know what to say. Maybe it depends on the listener's awareness? Generally, words get converted into the language your brain recognizes as your mother tongue, or the language you often use in your daily life..." Satsuki hypothesized with interest.

"Speaking of which, Satsuki. You shouldn't keep our guest on her feet while you're talking. There are some things I'd like to ask for more details about, but this is your grand reunion. I'm sure you both are giddy with excitement, and you must have much to discuss. Miharu also seems a little nervous, so how about the two of you speak alone first?" Francois suggested, having read the room. He of course wanted to show consideration for the two of them and let them feel comfortable.

However, in reality, just like how Satsuki and Miharu may have found it difficult to speak in front of Francois, Francois had things he found difficult to say in front of Satsuki too, which is why he made the suggestion.

"...Is that okay?" Satsuki turned a searching look towards Francois.

"Of course. I'd like to talk to Miharu myself later, but if it's just for the sequence of events and confirmation of the truth, I can get Haruto's report instead. There are things I'd like to ask Liselotte and Haruto too. You two would probably have nothing to do while that's going on, so it would be most efficient to have you talk to each other in another room instead," Francois said warmly, shrugging his shoulders.

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“I understand. Thank you for your consideration. In that case, we’ll head to my room. We won’t need an escort that way.” Satsuki said.

“That’s fine.”

“Let’s go then, Miharu,” Satsuki took Miharu’s hand.

“O-Okay…” Miharu looked at Rio and hesitated before nodding her head. But before Satsuki left the room, she came to a stop and stared at Rio. She bowed her head.

“Haruto, thank you for saving Miharu. I’ll be borrowing her for a moment, but could I talk with you later as well?”

“Of course.” Rio placed his right hand over his chest and nodded respectfully.

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After Satsuki left with Miharu, Rio and Liselotte continued their meeting with Francois.

“Now, without further ado, I’d like to hear the facts regarding Miharu in Haruto’s own words. The note from Liselotte didn’t have any details. Would you mind?” Francois looked at Rio and said.

“I understand.” Rio bowed his head with familiar ease, then began to explain the events that had happened to Miharu until now.

At first, immediately after she was summoned to this world, Miharu roamed around a wide grassland at the border between the Kingdoms of Galarc and Centostella. She was nearly abducted by merchants to be sold as a slave, when Rio, who had been passing by on his journey, had saved her.

Then, after taking Miharu in under his care, he used an ancient artifact to teach her the language of this world, which she studied dutifully. At one point, they realized that Miharu’s friends might have become heroes in this world and started looking into the background of each region’s

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hero.

Other than the part about the ancient magic artifact, there weren't any other falsehoods in his story. However, they had decided not to reveal Aki and Masato's presence yet, so their names didn't come up.

"...I now understand the general gist of things. It was a tremendously meritorious feat of you to take in Satsuki's friend and exert your efforts to reunite them. Furthermore, your merits in saving Amande, Liselotte, and Princess Flora are brilliant as well. I commend you once again. You have truly done your duty well," Francois said in a stately manner once he'd finished listening.

"It is an honor to receive your words." Rio bowed his head deeply.

"I'd like to confirm a few things."

"Please, ask away."

"It doesn't sit well with me that someone as capable as you has remained unaffiliated until now. I heard your parents were migrants — is this true?" Francois asked, staring straight at Rio.

"It is true."

"Then, where did you learn the etiquette of a noble? I cannot believe that a commoner from the streets could acquire such skills," Francois asked intrusively, without hesitation. This was an area that even Liselotte, who knew that Rio had memories of his previous life, had refrained from asking out of consideration, but it wasn't a topic that was too much for the king to ask.

Liselotte watched Rio's expression with a sidelong look in interest.

"One of my acquaintances is a noble, so I learned by interacting with them." Unaffected by the question, Rio answered fluently. He'd learned in the Royal Academy of Beltrum, but he couldn't say that directly.

Incidentally, the acquaintance he was speaking of was

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Celia.

“What is the name of that noble? Which kingdom are they from?”

“Due to several complications in the past, they are currently in hiding under an alias. I am terribly sorry to say this, but I cannot reveal that person’s name without their permission. I humbly ask for your forgiveness,” Rio answered, bowing his head lower. While it wasn’t favorable to refuse to answer Francois’ question, that didn’t mean he could reveal Celia’s existence, either.

“I see. If you say that person has special circumstances to be considered, then I won’t pry any further for now. What I want to know is the motives behind the actions of a person like you. Your background and relationships are merely things to support that.” Francois said eloquently.

“I am personally unaffiliated with any kingdom. I am not moving under the directions of the noble acquaintance I have, either. The relationship I have with that person is purely personal, and they are completely unrelated to the current case. Furthermore, while I am not the most familiar with kingdom politics, I am certain that the noble holds no grudge towards Your Majesty or the Kingdom of Galarc,” Rio replied, taking a stab at what Francois wasn’t saying.

“Then, you moved to allow Miharu and Satsuki to meet each other. What did you want to gain from having them meet?” Francois asked bluntly.

“I only want what Miharu wants,” Rio stated simply.

“…Huh?” Francois let out a disappointed sound. The members of royalty sitting in on the meeting also looked like they were taken by surprise.

“Miharu wanted to meet Satsuki. That is why I wanted to be of assistance to her. That’s all there was to it,” Rio added after observing Francois’ reaction.

“…That was the only reason you approached Liselotte and accomplished so much?” Francois asked while staring at Rio

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closely.

“It was a coincidence that I came across Liselotte during her crisis. Of course, I considered the possibility of the Galarc hero being Satsuki and had the thought to approach her for it for my own self interests. However, I believe things have only gone this smoothly thanks to Liselotte’s power and Miharu’s great fortune in that the hero was indeed her friend Satsuki,” Rio replied humbly.

Immediately after, Francois’ mouth lifted in a wicked grin. “Bwa—bwahahaha! You sure say fascinating things. Everything is for Miharu’s sake, in order to save the girl toyed with by fate—so you’re saying that you pulled these hero-like achievements for that simple reason?” Francois said, laughing heartily.

“I believe hero-like is too high a praise for someone like me…”

“Ridiculous. You saved one of my kingdom’s key cities, the daughter of a great noble, the princess of a prominent kingdom, and repelled a demi-dragon in the process. If you cannot call the person who accomplished these things a hero, what would you consider a hero to be? Not to mention, at the end of all these achievements, the reason turned out to be all for a single girl? It almost sounds suspicious, but that’s precisely why it sounds like the stories of legend. You’re a man to respect.” Francois grinned good-naturedly, brushing Rio aside. The royal man and woman were looking at Francois as though they were seeing something rare.

“…I am unworthy of your words,” Rio said modestly, hanging his head low.

“Have a little pride. You’ve done enough to allow yourself that. However… heh heh heh. Delightful. I haven’t laughed freely in so long. Perhaps it’s because of how often I talk to the sly foxes in the kingdom and the royal court, but I had braced myself for some ulterior motive. If I may so ask informally—are you in love with Miharu?” Francois was still

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holding back his stifled laughter as he asked Rio.

"...No, that isn't the case." Rio shook his head with a troubled look.

"Incidentally, how old are you?"

"I am sixteen."

"Oh? How young. You have composure beyond your age. I couldn't tell what kind of a person you were from what I saw in the report, so I wanted to figure out where your loyalties lay in this meeting... Ah, but now I understand a little. A mysterious enchanted swordsman with the ability to repel a large demi-dragon's breath," Francois boasted in good humor.

"It's an honor," Rio said in a show of modesty.

"You've brought an interesting man here, Liselotte." Francois grinned, looking to the girl in question.

"I'm honored. Having had nothing but unfortunate events happen recently, I consider meeting Sir Haruto to be a blessing of the highest degree. I believed that Your Majesty would be able to see Sir Haruto's disposition with a face-to-face meeting, so I'm delighted to hear Your Majesty's praise for him," Liselotte said with a cheerful smile.

"So you're saying the current situation is exactly as you planned, hmm? How vexing." Contrary to his words, Francois' mouth was turned in a satisfied smile.

While Miharu's presence was very useful for maintaining Satsuki's good mood, this man might unexpectedly be the bigger catch. Liselotte seems to have formed a favorable relationship with him in the time before the banquet, too. The reason why she set the timing of this meeting to just before the banquet was probably because she wanted to monopolize her relationship with him. I see she hasn't changed at all, he thought.

"I humbly ask for Your Majesty's mercy." Liselotte quietly lowered her head.

"I've had a wonderful meeting. All that's left is to hear

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some things from Miharu and make a judgment. With my interest piqued, I expect you to entertain me in a little more conversation. But first, I owe an apology to the savior of our kingdom for making accusatory remarks. Forgive me." Francois apologized to Rio with a strained smile. His tone was still from a position of power, but it was already quite the exception to apologize to a wanderer with unclear background. It showed just how highly Francois valued Rio in such a short amount of time.

"There's no need for that at all." Rio bowed his head with emphasis.

Francois' smile softened faintly. "I see. Then, allow me to introduce my son and daughter. This is the First Prince Michel and Second Princess Charlotte. They are 21 and 14, respectively. You two, come here and introduce yourselves to Haruto."

The two of them approached Rio, who promptly stood up to bow to them.

"I am the first prince, Michel Galarc. News of your military feats in Amande have reached my ears too. I never imagined I'd be able to meet the rumored hero. It's an honor." Michel gave a slightly exaggerated shrug of his shoulders as he introduced himself to Rio. He had blond hair and a handsome appearance that was well proportioned, but he had a certain pompous air to him.

"No, I am honored to have caught Your Highness' eye," Rio replied to Michel with a friendly smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Haruto. I am the second princess, Charlotte Galarc. It's wonderful to know that the hero who saved Liselotte is such a young and intelligent gentleman." Charlotte smiled cheerfully and addressed Rio in a clear and cute voice. Her appearance was truly adorable, her semi-long hair a deep red that suited her well, and although innocence remained in her face, her demeanor was that of a lady.

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“I am unworthy of your praise. Thank you, Princess Charlotte.” Just like with Michel, Rio responded to Charlotte in a friendly manner.

“No, it’s extremely rare for Father to take a liking to someone when meeting them for the first time, you know? That in itself is something you can be proud of,” Charlotte said with a carefree smile.

“Now, don’t say that, Charlotte,” Francois said with a slight smile.

Charlotte showed a hint of a mischievous expression. “Hehe, it seems like Father is feeling embarrassed.”

“Don’t trouble Father too much, Charlotte,” Michel chided her in exasperation.

“Yes, Brother.” Charlotte nodded obediently.

“As you can see, she’s still a bit childish, but she’s a considerate little sister. She’s got a sociable personality, so she’ll probably talk to you about various things, so please treat her well,” Michel said, like a good older brother.

“As you wish.” Rio smiled and nodded, observing how they seemed to be quite the close pair of siblings.

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Meanwhile, while Rio was speaking with Francois and the others…

On the top floor of one of the many towers of the Galarc royal castle was Miharu. She was being led to the living space of the quarters that was allocated for Satsuki to live in.

Satsuki headed to the kitchen to prepare tea and snacks, while Miharu sat down alone on the sofa in the living room. She looked around the space in interest — the room was furnished with what were clearly expensive items, filling the room with the mood of a stylish five-star hotel suite.

Several minutes later, Satsuki appeared in the living room.

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“Thanks for waiting. Here, help yourself.” Satsuki placed the tray of tea and snacks on the table before sitting on the sofa across from Miharu.

“Thank you. Do you live in this room alone?” Miharu bobbed her head and asked.

“Yes. They offered to assign me a maid, but I told them I can do it all myself and refused entry from anyone else. There’s a living room and dining room, and the kitchen and bathroom are all fully furnished. There are three bedrooms, so it’s a little too big for someone who’s living alone, but it’s kind of like living in an apartment,” Satsuki said with a bitter smile.

“Then the chance of being eavesdropped on here is…?”

“No one can step into this room without my permission. You can speak without worrying here, so tell me everything. With how you’re acting, I’m guessing you didn’t want the king to hear?” Satsuki tilted her head with a smile at Miharu’s nervousness.

“Yes. The truth is, Aki and Masato came to this world with me, but they’re hiding in a different location right now…”

“I see, so the two of them are here as well. I guess it’s a small blessing that you guys weren’t all separated, huh… Yeah, I should just be happy the two of them are safe. You didn’t tell the king that the two are somewhere else?” Satsuki’s thoughts processed fast and she was quick on the uptake.

“Yes, Haruto advised me that it would be dangerous for all of us to appear when we weren’t certain of the situation.”

“…So it was his idea to bring you to the castle?”

“I requested it. Haruto said he could come to the castle alone to make contact with you, but it pained me to leave everything to him…” Miharu shook her head slowly, looking somewhat apologetic as she answered.

“I see… I would have liked to see Aki and Masato too, but I think it was a careful and correct decision not to bring

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them to the castle right away. I'll tell you about myself later, but could you first tell me in chronological order what happened to you guys? And about Haruto — the one who saved you." Satsuki stared closely at Miharu's face and smiled gently. Miharu nodded in agreement and began to recall what had happened to her.

"We first wandered onto a grass field in this world. There was nothing around us, my cell phone didn't have a signal, and we were at a loss…"

"…That's a tough situation to be in. I was summoned to the castle so it was fine for me, but you guys were walking along a modern street when you were pulled into the wilderness, huh?" Satsuki said with a pained expression.

"Yes, we were really confused. We decided to head towards civilization and started to walk, but…" Miharu recalled and frowned faintly.

Satsuki seemed to notice the change in Miharu's expression, as she held her breath. "Did something happen?"

"Umm, the first people we met were slave merchants that nearly abducted us," Miharu replied as brightly as possible.

"Wait, did you get out of that okay?!" Satsuki asked in a panic.

"Yes, as soon as we were forced onto the carriages, Haruto appeared and saved us. I couldn't tell what was going on, but I believe there was a fight. He settled things with the slave merchants for us…" Miharu spoke about what happened vaguely. She didn't actually know what had happened outside, but she could tell from the yelling that some sort of commotion had happened.

"You really had it so much tougher than I did… and yet, you lived courageously and even found me again. I'm ashamed to say I was moping for a long time after I came to this world," Satsuki said, looking guilty.

"I was together with Aki and Masato, and we had Haruto, who arranged everything for us, so that's why I was able to

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be at my best.” Miharu shook her head with a wry smile.

“…He sounds like an amazing person, that Haruto. I can tell you really trust him a lot. But, just who is he?” Satsuki asked.

“What do you mean, who is he?” Perhaps it was because Satsuki’s question had wide implications, or perhaps it was because she was suddenly asked about Rio, that Miharu questioned her back in confusion.

“How should I put it… His appearance almost looks like a half-Japanese person with strong western blood, you know? His hair’s grey too, and the name Haruto has connections to Germany, but it could also be seen as a Japanese name… so I’m curious, I guess. I’ve never seen anyone with a face like his in this world, so I was wondering why he’s done so much for you guys…” Satsuki added to her question, asking in a roundabout way as to whether Haruto was Japanese.

“Umm, Haruto’s a person of this world who was born and raised in the Strahl region. It’s just… and I’d like you to refrain from telling others what I’m about to say without Haruto’s permission, but do you know about the place called the Wilderness to the east of Galarc?” Miharu said, choosing her words carefully. For the record, she had talked to Rio in advance and predetermined how much she was allowed to explain about him in her reunion with Satsuki.

“…Ah, yeah.” Satsuki nodded slowly.

“Haruto’s parents are from a place further east from the Wilderness called the Yagumo region. They migrated here, but it seems like people with black hair and what we would consider East Asian faces on Earth live there.”

“So that’s why he has a face similar to a Japanese person…” Satsuki accepted with interest.

“If you search in the Strahl region, you’d be able to find people with similar faces with ancestors from Yagumo. Though they’re very few and far between,” said Miharu.

“Huh, really… Oh, we went off topic. I don’t see any

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problem with telling other people this, though. Is there a reason why it's a secret?" Satsuki asked curiously.

"Umm, the part I'd like you to stay quiet about is yet to come… Can you promise me that you won't tell anyone else?" Miharu asked Satsuki in return, her words a bit inarticulate.

"…Yeah, I promise." Satsuki nodded firmly with a serious expression.

With a gentle, somewhat sad smile, Miharu began to speak. "The reason why Haruto's done so much for us is because he's kind. That's the first and foremost reason. But it's possible that the fact we're Japanese also played a small role in that."

That's right. Haruto — Haru-kun — he knew about me and Aki. He knew, yet he stayed quiet about it as he saved us. Miharu reflected on that truth in her heart anew.

"…What do you mean?" Satsuki tilted her head dubiously.

"Haruto has memories of his previous life. Memories of when he was a Japanese person…" Miharu stated clearly.

"…I'm shocked," Satsuki said after a long pause.

"Is it unbelievable?" Miharu asked nervously.

Satsuki sighed with a shrug. "If I was still in Japan, I might not have believed it. But right now, for some strange reason, I can accept it pretty easily… I'm here, in a world like this, after all. Is that what they call reincarnation? In other words, Haruto has memories of when he lived on Earth?"

"Yes. It seemed like he was a university student in Japan." Miharu nodded.

"A Japanese university student, huh… Ah, then the magic artifact that allowed you to communicate was…" Satsuki recalled their earlier conversation with a gasp.

"That was a lie to hide Haruto's secret from the king. I'm sorry." Miharu bowed her head apologetically.

"No, it's okay. Now that I know the situation, I understand. But… are you sure about this? Telling me his

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secret like this…” Satsuki asked Miharu hesitantly.

“Yes, I’ve received permission from him, on the condition that you keep your silence.”

“Even so, that’s quite a risky move if you want to keep it a secret. Of course I won’t tell anyone, but I don’t see how this benefits him in any way…”

“It’s because I trust you, Satsuki. Because of that, Haruto is also willing to trust you. He said that he didn’t want us to lie to you, out of consideration for our relationship…” Miharu said with a warm expression.

“Ah, I see. So that’s how it is. I think I understand why you trust him so much now. He’s a very sincere person, isn’t he? Okay, in that case… I’ll trust him too. I’ll have to thank him properly later, and I’d like to have a conversation with the three of us too.” Satsuki felt like she understood Rio a little more and felt deeply impressed.

Argh! I’m so embarrassed for thinking he was shady! Satsuki scolded herself lightly.

“You could just call Haruto to this room too,” Miharu suddenly said without much thought.

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” Satsuki clapped her hands together.

“Huh?” Miharu was taken aback.

“Let’s go talk to the king,” Satsuki said, completely on board.

“Talk? Right now?”

“Yup. I’ll ask if it’s okay for you and Haruto to stay in my quarters tonight.” Satsuki gave a carefree smile, whereas her statement was definitely more than Miharu had expected.

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Afterward, in the reception room where Rio was meeting with Francois…

“By the way, Haruto. Would you be interested in being

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knighted for your service to our kingdom? For a swordsman of your caliber, I can guarantee a highway to success—what do you say to that?" Francois asked.

"...My deepest apologies. It's a very tempting offer for a migrant like me, and I do appreciate it, but..." Rio's face stiffened a bit as he declined the offer. It was a direct offer from the king himself—the weight was different than if the offer was coming from a noble. While it wasn't a formal approach, openly refusing was a fairly difficult action to take. Michel didn't have a very happy look on his face.

"Oh? Has Liselotte made a pass already, perhaps?" Francois asked curiously, not looking upset as he did so.

One path to serve a regular noble daughter, another path to serve the kingdom — and the king himself — as a knight. For anyone with standard values as a noble, the latter would be the obvious choice. However, Liselotte being the noblewoman in question made it a different matter entirely. That was how much worth the name Liselotte Cretia, daughter of Duke Cretia, currently held.

"I gave him an offer too, of course. But I have yet to receive a favorable response," Liselotte added.

"Is there a reason?" Francois asked Rio directly.

"...I explained this to Lady Liselotte as well, but I am in the middle of a journey to find someone who had ties to my migrant parents. My journey is currently suspended in order to assist Miharu, but once this case is settled, I am thinking of resuming my travels around the world again." Rio lowered his gaze as he answered, expressing his humility.

"I see. Indeed, there are privileges to being knighted into nobility, but it comes at a cost of responsibility for the kingdom. You wouldn't be able to travel at the drop of a hat..." Francois said thoughtfully, accepting his response.

"Since that was the case, I've asked Sir Haruto to give us some consideration if he should ever find himself in need of permanent residence in the future," Liselotte said,

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immediately playing up the relationship between herself and Rio.

While it was Rio making the choice — and there was no guarantee the choice would be between these two options only — by stating that she had made such a comment to him already, she hoped she could soften the blow if Rio would choose her in the future. Even if the person she was up against was the king, having a person like Rio snatched away would be quite undesirable. There was nothing to lose by building the right foundations for the future.

"I see you have covered all your bases, as usual," Francois said, sensing the intentions behind Liselotte's words.

Well, it would be too harsh to say "give up" to you, I suppose. Although, I may have said it if it had been anyone other than Liselotte. The king grinned.

At that very moment, someone knocked on the door to the reception room.

"...Who is it?" With a pointed look, Francois directed an attendant waiting inside the room to go check the door. The attendant immediately stood up and walked over.

"Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu have returned." The woman opened the door for the two of them and promptly showed them inside.

"Ooh, Satsuki, Miharu. That was unexpectedly fast. Are you done with your talk?" Francois' eyes widened at the sight of them.

"Yes, we didn't want to keep everyone waiting for too long, and I also had something I wanted to ask... Have you finished your discussions here?" Satsuki looked around at the peaceful atmosphere they had been chatting in.

"Pretty much. He's a wandering swordsman with an enchanted sword powerful enough to repel a demi-dragon's breath. I came here today wondering what kind of ruffian he might be, but I was met by a well-educated man. An interesting fellow indeed. Now... what was it that you

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wanted to discuss?”

“Ah… Umm, how should I put this? I have a request. But first, I was wondering what the plans are for Miharu and Haruto tonight,” said Satsuki.

“Has anything been decided, Liselotte?” Francois asked, since she’d been the one to bring them here.

“Liselotte…” Satsuki mumbled, looking at her curiously.

“Ah, yes. You haven’t been introduced to Liselotte yet. Before answering your question, you should be introduced.”

“Much obliged, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to be meeting you, great hero. I am Duke Cretia’s oldest daughter, Liselotte. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Liselotte put on a sociable smile and greeted her in a ladylike manner.

“Yes, I’ve heard of you. As a woman, I have found the products of the Ricca Guild to be irreplaceable. I heard that you were a young noblewoman, but I didn’t imagine you would be like this…” Satsuki replied while staring at Liselotte’s face.

“You may be pleased to know that Satsuki is tremendously fond of the products from the Ricca Guild,” Francois informed Liselotte with a good-natured smile.

“Why, what an honor.” Liselotte grinned broadly.

“I wasn’t able to explain earlier, but Liselotte is the one who actually brought us to the castle,” Miharu said to Satsuki, who was standing beside her. At a glance, it sounded like an explanation for Satsuki’s benefit, but it also functioned as an explanation for Liselotte as well. Liselotte had given Miharu permission to explain the secret behind the Ricca Guild’s products to Satsuki.

The matter of whether Lady Satsuki has realized or not has been placed on hold. From the looks of things, it’s maybe a 50-50 shot that she has? Even if she’s realized it, there wouldn’t be much chance of her mentioning it to anyone, Liselotte thought, making a guess based on Miharu’s words just now and Satsuki’s appearance.

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“Why, is that true? Thank you, Liselotte.” Satsuki bowed elegantly.

“No, it was my natural duty as a noble of the Galarc Kingdom, and I also had a debt to repay Sir Haruto… At any rate, please raise your head,” Liselotte said, bowing her head at Satsuki in return.

“If possible, I’d love to speak to you sometime in the future too,” Satsuki said as she raised her head.

“Gladly. I’ll be in the capital for the duration of the banquet, so please call on me anytime you find yourself idle,” Liselotte agreed with a friendly nod. Based on their positions, it was a difficult task for even a duke’s daughter like Liselotte to ask to meet Satsuki alone, but that wasn’t the case if Satsuki was the one inviting her.

“Yes, I may contact you in the near future. I look forward to seeing you then.”

“Yes, please. Oh, that’s right. You asked about Sir Haruto and Lady Miharu’s plans for tonight. The plan was for them to stay at my family’s home in preparation for the banquet. We didn’t make any other particular plans,” Liselotte answered Francois’ question smoothly.

“Hmm. They were to attend the banquet by accompanying you, correct? If Miharu and Haruto are fine with it, I was going to invite them to join me for dinner… What was your request, Satsuki?” Francois asked.

“The truth is, I was hoping Miharu and Haruto could stay in my quarters tonight,” Satsuki began.

“Wha—?!” Michel gasped.

“Miharu aside… Haruto too?” Francois asked Satsuki calmly.

“Yes. Miharu is a given, but I’d like to have the time to talk to her savior, Haruto, too,” Satsuki explained confidently, nodding.

“Hmm…” Francois hummed, thinking it over calmly.

“What are you saying? Do you know what it means to

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have a man stay in the room of an unmarried woman like you?" Michel admonished Satsuki vehemently.

"Oh, but Miharu will be staying as well. Anyway, her aside, Rio'll be staying in a separate bedroom in my quarters. Just what exactly are you inferring from that?" Despite knowing the meaning behind Michel's words, Satsuki pushed back with her logic.

Miharu must have told her about the plan. While it certainly would be easier to sneak her out to the stone house if we stayed in her quarters... I can understand the prince's objections, Rio surmised. In reality, Satsuki was just being extremely proactive. Miharu hadn't mentioned they would take her out of the castle temporarily, which was a trivial misunderstanding.

"Even so, there's no need to talk in your room at night, is there?" Michel tried to argue back.

"Oh? There are many things to talk about that aren't just about us, so if we want to chat in a relaxed setting, I believe night time would be the best," Satsuki said bluntly.

"But..."

"Enough, Michel." Michel still wasn't backing down, causing Francois to chide his son.

"Father..." Michel grimaced.

"There, there, Brother. Listen to what Father has to say first," Charlotte said cheerily.

"...What is your opinion, Father?" Michel asked with a sigh, seemingly calmed by his sister's words.

"Well, we have no right to restrain the hero's personal life without a good reason. It would be one thing if she was to be alone with Haruto, but Miharu will be there too," Francois said easily.

"Guh..." Michel looked conflicted as he glared at Rio. Rio's own opinion had not been asked for until now.

Well, there is a gap in social status. I should stay quiet.

If someone had asked him for his opinion, Rio would have

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no choice but to answer. The issue being discussed *was* of concern to him, but not enough for him to emphasize his own opinion and cause trouble. Despite noticing Michel's gaze, he maintained his silence.

"Do you have a complaint to voice?" Francois asked Michel.

"No... If that's what Father says." Michel was unable to defy Francois, accepting his words reluctantly.

"Thank you for your approval, King Francois." With the conversation wrapped up, Satsuki thanked him before things could drift off track again.

Francois shrugged and shook his head. "No need for that. But... let's see. It doesn't have to be an exchange, but how about having dinner tonight with everyone here? With the three of you, that is," he said to Satsuki, Miharu, and Haruto.

"Of course, I'd be happy to. Is that okay with you, Miharu and Haruto...?" Satsuki nodded in satisfaction, looking to them for confirmation.

"Yes, I'm fine with it as long as Haruto is..." Miharu replied, passing the decision on to Rio.

"...I'm sorry, Haruto. I went and made the assumption that you'd be fine with it, but of course you're allowed to refuse," Satsuki said, watching Rio's expression as she apologized regretfully.

"No, it's not that I'm against it, it just feels like something far above myself..." Rio muttered his response with a troubled look. He couldn't respond in any other way while he was before Francois and the others.

"Eheheh. Well, he isn't in a position where he can refuse, nor can he act happy about it. Don't question him any further than that, Satsuki. You don't mind then, Haruto?" Francois laughed heartily, covering for Rio's response.

"Right..." Rio didn't bother to excuse himself further, nodding with his head down.

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“Then, it’s decided. Miharu and Haruto will stay in Satsuki’s quarters, but before that, Liselotte will join us for dinner.” Francois chuckled.

“It would be my honor.” Liselotte smiled earnestly.

“Now, Michel and I have official duties to attend to, so we will be excusing ourselves here. Charlotte will remain so that the five of you can talk together. Let us go, Michel. I entrust the rest to you, Charlotte,” Francois commanded, before departing quietly.

“Leave it to me. I’ll make sure Miharu and the others feel welcome.” Charlotte smiled cutely, expressing her enthusiasm for her duty as a hostess.

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After their meeting with the king, the four women and Rio continued their conversation.

“Now that all the women are here, let’s have fun chatting.” Charlotte grinned as she looked around at everyone, speaking happily. The order of seating from the closest seat to the door of the room was Rio and Liselotte; across from them sat Charlotte, Miharu, and Satsuki.

“If I’m intruding on your conversation, I can leave the room, being that I’m a man…” Rio seemed to feel a little uncomfortable. While he did live in the stone house surrounded by women, he wasn’t on very friendly terms with anyone in the room other than Miharu.

“Why, we can’t have that. Father told the five of us to talk together,” Charlotte replied.

“That is true. Then I shall humbly remain here and join in.”

“There’s no need to be humble about it. I’m personally very interested in you, so I was hoping to talk to you more.” Charlotte peered up at Rio and batted her eyelashes. Any man unaccustomed to women would be justified in

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misunderstanding her attitude.

“I am honored to hear that. In that case, I will gladly accompany you.” Rio took Charlotte’s words as some kind of lip service and brushed it off smoothly, accepting to sit in on the conversation with a more positive expression than before.

“…Okay. Now, what shall we talk about? Perhaps it would be most appropriate to address what’s on everyone’s mind…” Charlotte looked about the room at everyone’s faces once again, then fixed a blank look on Miharu beside her and tilted her head, smiling in a friendly manner “Actually. I introduced myself to Sir Haruto, but I haven’t greeted Lady Miharu yet. My name is Charlotte Galarc, the second princess of this kingdom. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Miharu seemed to be rather nervous in front of her first princess. She bowed her head. “Y-Yes. I’m Miharu Ayase. It’s very nice to meet you, Your Highness.”

“Why, there’s no need for so much formality. Both you and Lady Satsuki are from another world, which makes your existences close to saints. Even if I’m a princess, your status is no further from mine.” Charlotte placed a hand against her cheek, troubled. In reality, the reason why Charlotte was treating Miharu as an equal was less because she originated from the same world as Satsuki and more because she was a close friend of the hero. Of course, it wasn’t something she would voice aloud.

“That’s not true — I’m just your average commoner,” Miharu replied humbly, denying her words as though they were outrageous.

“Hehe, Lady Miharu seems to be a very modest person. Would you say she’s normally like this, Lady Satsuki?” Charlotte smiled elegantly and turned to the girl in question.

“Well, she’s a very good girl. She has a nice personality, is good at cooking, works hard, and is smart; though she’s a

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little shy around boys, that's what makes her so cute! In middle school, she was rumored to be the cutest girl in the school," Satsuki said, listing all of Miharu's good qualities with emphasis.

"My, is that so? I can understand that when I look at Lady Miharu. Don't you agree, Liselotte?" Charlotte turned to Liselotte happily.

"Yes. Lady Miharu's character was described very accurately." Liselotte nodded with a smile.

"T-That's not true… I'm plain, and Satsuki is so much more amazing than I am. She was practically the idol of the school." Miharu's face turned bright red as she looked downwards and praised Satsuki.

"Aww, that's not true. Me and the boys in my grade all said you were the cutest, and your cooking was so famous that even the culinary club said they wanted to try it, you know?" Satsuki laughed.

"Y-You're lying. That's the first I've heard of such a rumor." Miharu shrunk her entire body back.

"No, it's the truth. Middle school boys are surprisingly slow, you know. There weren't many of them who had the courage to actually confess… But someone actually confessed to you before, no?" Satsuki asked.

"I have, but I've never dated anyone, and I didn't have any boys I was close to, so… Hasn't someone confessed their feelings to you, Satsuki?"

"Well, I can't deny that, but it wasn't very many," Satsuki answered with a bitter smile.

In reality, during the time when Satsuki and Miharu were enrolled in the same middle school, the rest of the school considered them to be the most beautiful girls around. However, because Miharu was uncomfortable around men, she wasn't the type of person who would approach them herself, so she never understood how popular she was from their perspective.

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As for Satsuki, because she was a young lady from a well-off family and her own standards were too high, she felt out of reach and hard to approach.

Liselotte must have surmised what kind of school circumstance Satsuki and Miharu were placed in, as she giggled. “I think I have an idea as to what your school days were like. The two of you must have had many admirers.”

“No, no. Miharu aside, that wasn’t the case for me.”

“Maybe for Satsuki, but I wasn’t…”

“Why, the two of you are perfectly in sync. I’m envious.” Charlotte smiled in amusement.

“Thank you,” Satsuki said in embarrassment. “But Char, you’ve known Liselotte for a long time too, right? You’re the second princess and she’s a duke’s daughter, after all.”

“Yes, we’ve known each other since we were young — we’re what you might call childhood friends. Liselotte is one year older than me, but we used to attend the royal academy together. Come to think of it, we had lots of tea parties back then. It brings back memories.”

“Yes. I remember we would meet up once or twice a week,” Liselotte said nostalgically, smiling.

“But then Liselotte left me behind and rapidly skipped years to graduate from the academy. When she established the Ricca Guild, she got so busy that she couldn’t come for tea anymore. I was lonely, you know. You should come visit me a little more.” Charlotte pouted.

“Yes, I’m very sorry about that.” Liselotte nodded with a strained smile.

“But I’m glad we’re able to take our time chatting today. I’ve heard many fascinating things from Satsuki and everyone.”

“Me, too.”

Meanwhile, there was a boy in the room who felt an indescribable sense of discomfort.

…*Should I really be here right now?* As the lone male

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present, Rio felt strangely awkward. Since he wasn't a very talkative person to begin with, being in a situation with four women exacerbated it.

"Incidentally, I am also curious as to what kind of person Sir Haruto is," Charlotte said, having noticed Rio suddenly.

"Me?" Rio cocked his head and blinked.

"Yes. The discussions were all serious with my father and brother present, but I'd like to know more about your nature. Let's see. Lady Miharu, in your eyes, what kind of person is Sir Haruto?" Charlotte turned her curious gaze towards Rio.

Miharu started with a shake when she was suddenly addressed. "Huh? What kind of person Haruto is…?"

"Yes. You've been living together in the several months since you came to this world, right? You should be the most familiar with him out of everyone here," Charlotte replied justifiably, giving Miharu no choice but to answer.

"Umm… Haruto is an amazing person." Miharu seemed to be embarrassed to talk about her impression of the person sitting across from her, as her words came out short and hesitant.

"Yes, I'm sure. He's strong, wise, and a person of character. Have the two of you been traveling by yourselves this entire time?" Charlotte asked, attempting to keep the conversation going.

"No, there were several other people who lived with us," said Rio.

"Oh, is that so? What kind of people were they? I must admit I'm a little curious about what kind of lifestyles the two of you had."

"There's one other boy, and he's just a twelve-year-old child. The others are all women, including Miharu. We're not family, but they're all my good friends. They're all living in a city on the outskirts of the capital for now." Rio answered as much as he could.

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Lady Cecilia and Lady Aishia must be with him too, Liselotte assumed from Rio's explanation.

"Does that mean you live in a house with young men and women? It must be a lively and fun place," Charlotte said with a grin.

"Yes, it can get a little rowdy, but it's full of laughter," Rio said, smiling gently.

"If there are a lot of women, then that means Miharu can relax in that environment, too," Satsuki said with a gentle look.

"Yes. I've been able to make a lot of friends thanks to Haruto." Miharu nodded happily.

"Just out of curiosity, doesn't having young men and women under the same roof cause one or two love affairs?" Charlotte suddenly asked.

"...Huh?!" Miharu gasped, having processed the meaning of the question.

"It doesn't," Rio denied with a strained smile.

"Is that only because Sir Haruto doesn't feel that type of emotion towards the other residents? You don't know how the women themselves feel about you, do you?" Charlotte asked logically.

"That... shouldn't be the case..." He couldn't be certain about how other people felt, so Rio muddled his words with a frown.

"In my opinion, I find it more questionable that the women don't feel anything while living with someone as wonderful as you," Charlotte said while staring directly at Rio.

"I'm honored to hear that, but I think you're giving me too much credit, Princess Charlotte." Rio smoothed over his expression with a smile and shook his head.

"My, I don't see it that way, though. Your personality and abilities are a given already, and if my aesthetic senses haven't gone funny, then I can say that you are a fairly

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beautiful person too. Your parents were both migrants, so you have a wonderfully exotic look to your face. Don't you agree, Liselotte?" Charlotte asked, turning to Liselotte. Being addressed so suddenly didn't sway Liselotte like it did Miharu, as her reply came with a smile.

"Yes. It's enough to make some of my attendants restless whenever Sir Haruto visits."

"See, I think I'm right." Charlotte looked at Rio smugly.

"Hahaha..." Rio was unsure how to respond, giving yet another strained smile. He wasn't used to girls like her who gossiped about love, so he didn't have much resistance to it. When he'd lived in the Karasuki Kingdom, the village girls would ask him similar questions, but that was the only exposure he'd had.

"I would love to hear the opinion of Lady Miharu, who actually lives with Sir Haruto. How much is he admired by the others? Of course, you can talk about your own thoughts too." Charlotte turned a gaze full of intense curiosity towards Miharu.

"Eh, no... Umm... Uh..." When Miharu was questioned, the flow of the conversation caused her to look at Rio, who sat opposite her. Her face reddened as she made eye contact with Rio, who looked uncomfortable.

"Enough, Char. There's no way she can say anything without the other people present, not to mention while she's in front of Haruto himself. Topics like this should be between closer friends, behind closed doors. She's not good when it comes to talking about these things to begin with, so don't bother her anymore." Charlotte's questions had become rather suggestive, but no one was in a position to warn her other than Satsuki, who sighed in exasperation.

"Oh my, I do apologize for that. As a princess with no reason to fall in love, I cannot help but feel extremely curious about how young men and women fall in love," Charlotte explained.

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“Hmm, well, royals have rather peculiar love lives. I’m personally more interested in hearing about that.” Satsuki changed the topic smoothly, causing Miharu to sigh in relief.

“The general rule is to have a political marriage, so marrying for love is actually the exception. It’s especially remarkable among the higher classes of nobility and royalty. Well… there is one such remarkable exception sitting with us right now, though.” Charlotte explained, looking at Liselotte.

“Huh, Liselotte was approved to marry freely for love?” Satsuki asked with interest.

“Well, yes. Everyone else here is aware already, but I had several achievements that were recognized and received the right to choose my own marriage partner,” Liselotte replied, slightly embarrassed.

“I can’t say this to very many people, but as another woman of the royalty and nobility class, I am envious of Liselotte. Even if it’s for the sake of the kingdom or family, no woman wants to marry someone they don’t even like. Men are able to select their political marriage partners to a degree, but many women don’t have any choice at all,” Charlotte explained, expressing her own desires to be like that in a roundabout way.

“There can’t be very many cases of a political marriage partner being someone you love, I imagine… Incidentally, I’ve never asked before, but what would happen in my case as a hero?” Satsuki asked with a contemplative look.

“…Of course, we would like to have you marry one of the royal members of our kingdom, but we cannot force you into doing it. A hero is a disciple of the mighty Six Wise Gods, after all,” Charlotte said with a hard to read smile, her tone cheerful.

“I see. If there are no plans for me to be forced into marriage, then I don’t need to worry for now. I don’t want to marry someone I don’t like, either. And I haven’t given up on returning to Earth yet,” Satsuki said with a small shrug.

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“In that case, we’ll have to find a wonderful gentleman from our kingdom to tie Lady Satsuki down to this world,” Charlotte said with a joking laugh.

It looks like I can’t let my guard down around this princess after all. How tiring… Rio let out a small sigh. At a glance, she seemed like a pure and sincere girl, but her conversation topics were rather suggestive and she asked them insistently while overstepping boundaries. Her face was also hard to read.

The fact that Francois had left their party to her care alone was proof of how much he trusted her. Due to their differences in social status, Rio couldn’t comment very freely either, so there were more instances where he couldn’t speak up than he anticipated.

It really was the right choice not to bring Aki and Masato along. Rio let out a small sigh and refocused his energies.

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Afterward, they continued to chat about love and other topics until it was time for dinner. Rio had been worn down quite a bit from the conversation with Charlotte, but Francois and Michel would be joining them for dinner, so he braced himself to not lower his guard yet.

However, contrary to Rio’s expectations, the dinner went by in a relaxed and peaceful manner. There were no topics brought up that he had to be particularly wary of, and the talks after dinner died off fairly early as they were told to wind down with Satsuki and returned to her rooms.

“Finally, it’s just the three of us. Come, take a seat so we can talk.” With Satsuki’s encouragement, Rio and Miharu sat down on the sofa in the living room. Satsuki headed to the kitchen to prepare tea for the three of them.

They had constantly been with someone since coming to the castle, so this was actually the first time Rio and Miharu

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had been alone together all day.

“How much did you tell Satsuki?” Rio asked before Satsuki had a chance to return.

“What happened after we came to this world, briefly. And she asked about you, so I told her about your previous life. I’ve mentioned that Aki and Masato are with us, but nothing about leaving the castle temporarily, Takahisa, or what to do in the future,” Miharu summarized.

Rio’s eyes widened faintly. “…I was wondering why you returned so quickly. How did you come to decide that I should stay overnight with you two?” He had honestly assumed that she had told Satsuki about the plan to sneak out of the castle, so they decided to make it easier by having Rio stay with them.

“Umm, when I told her about you, she wanted the three of us to talk together, so she said we should return to the king while he was still there…” Despite being a hero, not even Satsuki was bold enough to assume she could let Rio stay in her quarters with no consequences without the permission of the king. The king was a busy man, so she wanted to settle the discussion as soon as possible.

“She seems like a very proactive person.”

“Yes. She embodies the saying ‘there’s no time like the present.’” Rio and Miharu chuckled together.

“It seems like the two of you are having fun here. What are you talking about?” Satsuki said, suddenly appearing in the living room with a tray of tea.

“There are several things we need to explain and ask you about, so I was asking Miharu how much she had told you. And a little bit about what kind of person you are, Lady Satsuki,” Rio said.

“Hmm, I had this thought during dinner and the conversation with Char too, but… It makes me feel uneasy, so please — you don’t have to call me a lady. It might be a bad move in front of other people, but you don’t have to act

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so politely, either. At least when it's just the three of us," Satsuki said with a bitter smile.

"...I understand. Just 'Satsuki' it is, then." Rio's mouth softened into a smile as he dropped the title from Satsuki's name.

"Yes. Once again, it's nice to meet you, Haruto. I've heard about you, Aki, and Masato from Miharu. Thank you so much for saving the three of them and allowing me to see Miharu again." Satsuki smiled broadly and bowed her head deeply at Rio.

"No, I didn't really do anything significant."

"That's not true. Taking care of the basic needs of three people and teaching them everything about this world without compensation, even going as far as to find me and bring Miharu to the castle like this — it's an amazing feat. It's not something one would normally do just because you have memories of living in Japan. That's why I want to thank you properly. Though I don't have any real power, even if I'm in a high social position right now..."

"I'm grateful for your feelings alone. I don't need any other forms of gratitude."

"That doesn't sit right with me, though... Well, we can leave it aside for now. So, what was it you wanted to explain to me?"

"We'd like to know what actions you plan on taking, how Miharu will be treated in Galarc in the future, what would be the best for Aki and Masato with that in mind, and about their older brother, Takahisa. I think that's everything. There's one more thing, but that can come later," Rio listed off.

"...I have an idea where Takahisa might be. You may know this already, but three other heroes will be attending the banquet. Were you aware?"

"Three others, besides you? I know that the Duke Huguenot faction, who defected from the Kingdom of

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Beltrum, will be sending their hero, Sakata Hiroaki for sure. But other than that, I've only heard that the Kingdom of Centostella might send their hero, whose identity is still hidden…" It was Rio's first time hearing about a third hero.

"The hero coming from Centostella is already confirmed. Also, the hero from Beltrum Kingdom's government has also confirmed attendance," Satsuki said.

"…From the Beltrum Kingdom?" Rio's eyes widened in surprise. If that was the case, they would inevitably run into Duke Huguenot faction at the venue. He couldn't imagine what kind of situation would unfold.

"Yes. However, the one who became the official hero of the Beltrum Kingdom is named Shigekura Rui, which is the name of a large company's son, so he's unrelated to Takahisa."

"Do you have any personal connection to the Beltrum Kingdom's hero?" Rio asked.

"Mm, if you have memories of living in Japan, then you may have heard of the Shigekura Heavy Industry Company."

"…Yes. I have a vague memory of that name. They're a large company that represents Japan." His memories of being Amakawa Haruto in Japan came to him over 9 years ago, but Rio could remember that much.

"My relatives also ran a fairly large corporate group, so I knew him a little from that. Enough to know his name and face, at least."

"Sumeragi… Ah, you're from the Sumeragi Group?"

"Oh, you know my name too? Yup, I'm the daughter of an executive there." Satsuki nodded with a grin.

"I'm surprised." Rio knew she was a young lady from a well-off family, but he hadn't imagined she was the daughter of someone from such an enterprise.

"Ahaha, it's not like I'm a noble like they have in this world — I'm just a regular girl. Anyway, getting back on topic… Of the three heroes, Sakata Hiroaki and Shigekura

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Rui are most certainly not Takahisa. The problem is the hero summoned in Centostella."

"With four of the six heroes gathered in one location, there's a high probability it's him. You don't know the name of the hero, right?" asked Rio.

"Yeah. Apparently the Kingdom of Centostella is fairly closed off. There's no hostility with them, but there haven't been any diplomatic relations with us, despite being their neighbors, either. That's why they have a tendency to guard their kingdom secrets pretty closely, so we won't know the name of the hero attending the banquet until the night of. In my opinion, if they're going to attend anyway, it shouldn't hurt to just tell us," Satsuki explained, pouting her lips unhappily. "But apparently, the kingdom doesn't normally send ambassadors to attend banquets in foreign kingdoms. Well, they're normally not invited in the first place, and there were disagreements up until the last minute about whether to invite them this time, but I requested that they be invited on the chance I could find Miharu or Takahisa. So, Centostella was invited, but they didn't reply until just recently, which is when they said they'd be attending," she added with a thoughtful expression.

"...Naturally, you told them your name, right?" Rio confirmed with a contemplative look on his face.

"Yes. I don't know what kind of exchange happened behind Centostella's closed walls, but maybe my name was passed on to Takahisa, and he made an exception as a result. It may just be wishful thinking, but I can't help but hope that's the case." Satsuki nodded in satisfaction.

"Right. All that's left is whether or not to inform Aki about this." Rio nodded, looking at Miharu seated beside him.

"I'm sure Aki would be delighted to hear that. But there's a chance it may not be the case, and she might request to attend the banquet herself..."

"Perhaps it would be better to withhold the information

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until we can be certain that the Centostella hero is Takahisa?”

“…Okay. Even if we tell her, we’ll hold the details for now,” Miharu agreed with a worried look.

“Understood.” Rio didn’t have any particular objections to the plan and nodded his head.

“Hold on. Based on the way you two are talking, it almost sounds like you plan on leaving the castle before the banquet to meet Aki…” Satsuki interrupted, finding it suspicious that they were discussing meeting Aki and Masato, who were meant to be outside the castle, as though it was an easy task.

“This was what we were saving to discuss last, but it’s possible. To sneak out of the castle tonight and see Aki and Masato, that is.”

“…Sneak out?” Satsuki blinked, wondering if she had misheard Rio’s words.

“Yes. As long as you’re OK with it, we can leave the castle temporarily. I’m sure there’s no way for you to leave officially, so of course, you would be going out without notice…”

“How? This is the top floor of a tower and there are several guards outside my chambers, even at night. Once you get out, there are walls all around the castle, so I assumed it was impossible… It’d be a grave crime if you were caught, yeah?”

Rio looked around the room. “Yes, it would be extremely risky to move by foot. Which is why we’ll fly instead. From the magic essence search I conducted on the room, there don’t appear to be any essence detection-type artifacts. As long as no one enters the room to check for you in the middle of the night, we shouldn’t be caught.”

“W-Wait. You just said you could fly as though it was an everyday thing… My head can’t keep up with this.” Satsuki was completely confused, holding her right hand to her face as she held out her left one to signal Rio to stop.

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“It’s possible for Haruto,” Miharu said with confidence.

“…You have an artifact to make you fly?” Satsuki asked dubiously.

“No, there’s actually a technique similar to using essence to cast flying magic, though it’s not generally known, so I’d like to ask you to keep it a secret.”

“So something like that exists…” Satsuki muttered, her eyes widening in wonderment.

“As you’ve pointed out, being caught would be an extremely serious crime. If you’re afraid of sneaking out, we won’t insist on it. If you’ve considered all the risks and decide that it’s worth it, then we’ll take you to see Aki and Masato.”

“…What do you think, Miharu?” Satsuki asked.

“It’s scary to imagine what would happen if we’re caught, and I know it’s not something we should be doing, but I want you to meet Aki and Masato. They’ve really wanted to see you, and all the more so since they can’t come to the castle.” Miharu placed a hand against her chest.

“I see…” Satsuki closed her eyes in reflection for a while. “Honestly, if I said I didn’t have any objections at all, I’d be lying. …But I do want to meet those two soon. So the two problems at hand here are how big is the risk of being caught, and when I would be able to see Aki and Masato next if I pass up this chance,” she muttered calmly.

“The main concern with regard to being caught is whether anyone will visit your chambers in the middle of the night. In the case of the latter, it’s a matter of whether there are any other methods to meet the two of them without being detected by the kingdom. Of course, if it’s safe to have them be detected, then there’s no need to go that far.” Rio defined the two issues Satsuki raised with more precision.

“No one has ever entered my room without permission until now, and no one’s ever visited at night either. I think the chance of being caught there is close to zero. That is,

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unless the tower catches fire or an intruder is spotted, at least. It would be difficult to meet the two of them in a way where the kingdom wouldn't notice. Even if they gave me permission to go out, they'd definitely set a bodyguard on me. At the very least, it would be best to refrain from inviting the two of them to the castle until the banquet is over and they decide on how to deal with Miharu," Satsuki explained.

"Honestly speaking, how do you think the kingdom will treat Miharu?" Rio asked.

"They'll probably invite her to live in the castle first, I think. If she consents, she'll probably be treated like me. She'll be guaranteed an easy life and never lack any of the basics of living, but it'll feel a little suffocating... Though she will be free to act as she wishes, to an extent."

"...Would I be able to refuse?" Miharu asked fearfully.

"Probably. It seems like the heroes of this world have as much authority as the Pope in Medieval Europe, so they wouldn't be able to insist in front of me, at least. But they'd probably want to know your whereabouts, at the very least. They may try to secretly monitor you on top of that, or send people to stick to you under the name of security... Also, this one will happen even if you stay in the castle, but your name and face will spread, so you'll be at a higher risk of getting dragged into trouble. Wait, that's my fault. I'm sorry! Saying it out loud myself has made me feel really sorry for Miharu..." Satsuki frowned apologetically.

"N-No, I understood that when I came here. Haruto warned me of the same thing before we came to the castle, too." Miharu shook her head in a fluster, trying to encourage Satsuki.

"Actually, we also discussed what could happen to Miharu with Liselotte as well, and she had pretty much the same expectation as you and me. While she doesn't participate in kingdom politics, she's still a Galarc citizen, so the fact our

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predictions all overlap means things will pretty much happen as Satsuki expects. So if we sit and wait until after the banquet is over, I think the answer will naturally show itself," Rio said. The possibility of their prediction actually coming to fruition was high.

"...Then, if it really does happen like that, what do you guys want to do once the banquet is over, Miharu? Live in the castle? Or live outside the castle as you have been?" Satsuki asked.

"That's... the three of us all have slightly different directions we want..." Miharu said with a sidelong glance at Rio.

"...Really?" Satsuki's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yes. Aki really wants to reunite with Takahisa. If we find him, I don't think she'll accept any option where she can't be together with him."

"I see... Then, what about Masato?"

"It's also one of Masato's goals to meet with Takahisa again. However, if it comes at the cost of his freedom, I don't believe he wants to stay in the castle... In that case, he'd probably want to go with Haruto," Miharu said, making assumptions on Aki and Masato's intentions.

"Heh, is that so? Then what about you, Miharu?" Satsuki asked.

"I... I also want to stay with Haruto, I think. Though I haven't clearly explained that to Aki and Masato yet." Miharu explained, highly aware of Rio sitting beside her.

"...That's a little unexpected. Were you aware of that, Haruto?" Satsuki asked Rio with widened eyes.

"No, this is my first time hearing of it too..." Rio directed his gaze at Miharu as though to question her sincerity.

"Umm, is that okay?" Miharu asked.

"Of course, there's nothing wrong with that. I'll still be moving around a lot, but there's no problem if we continue to live as we have." Rio glossed over the question, putting on

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a smile like putting on a mask.

"By the way, if Takahisa is the hero of Centostella Kingdom, then Aki may say that she wants to go to Centostella, right? In that case, Miharu and Aki might be separated. What do you plan on doing about Aki, then?" Satsuki asked.

Miharu thought for a moment, before replying resolutely. "...In that case, Aki would be entrusted to Takahisa, and I'd have to have a proper talk with Aki to make sure she understands."

It's possible that we won't be able to return to Earth. If that happens, we'll have to consider who lives with who and where... I'll have to have a proper conversation with Aki about that too. If Haruto is Haru-kun, then all the more so, Miharu thought.

For Aki, the topic of her father and Haruto who disappeared after the divorce was taboo. That's why Miharu had never touched upon the topic of Haruto until now. However, having been like an older sister to Aki for so long, she could hardly run away forever.

"I see... That's a little surprising. Miharu and Aki always seemed so close to me — like real sisters. Can I ask why you want to stay with Haruto?" Satsuki could sense Miharu's strong determination, but wondered why she was willing to go as far as separating from Aki to stay with Rio.

"That's..."

It was *because* they were like siblings. However, it was too early to delve into the details and explain that.

"Ever since coming to this world, I've made so many close friends. I owe them all so much, and I want to stay with them. I want to start returning those debts. Of course, I believe Aki feels the same way as I do. I don't want to be separated from her either... But even though I can't decide which is more important, I have to make a choice, and it's hard to explain..." Concealing her feelings toward Aki,

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Miharu tried to verbalize her inner thoughts with frustration. Her explanation wasn't only meant for Satsuki, but for Rio too. She glanced at him to see his reaction, but Rio put on another smile when they made eye contact.

"...Yeah. It's not something you can just explain easily. I'm sorry for asking. I think I get what you're trying to say, though," Satsuki said, nodding her head.

"I'm glad to hear that. I haven't told anyone else about this yet."

Satsuki frowned. "I see. I get how it could've led to a few clashes if you had. Aki would probably argue furiously if she heard what you just said."

"...Yeah. That's why I still haven't been able to tell her yet." Miharu nodded with a worried expression.

"But even if they lived apart, it's not like they'd never see each other again. They may not be able to see each other easily anymore, but it won't change the fact they have a precious bond with everyone and the unified goal to return back to Earth together someday. So wouldn't it be better if we involved the kingdoms and got them to form an agreement to make it possible for them to meet whenever they wanted?" Rio asked. Miharu's expression fell when he mentioned returning to Earth.

"Oh? You say that like it's an easy thing to do," Satsuki replied with some level of delight.

"You're going to have to live separately due to the kingdom's affairs. It shouldn't be too much to ask for that kind of deal to be arranged. Considering His Majesty King Francois' actions up until now, it would be difficult to reject it if it's a request directly from you. Of course, I'll do whatever I can to help too."

"Hmm. Saying that is going to get my hopes up."

"I can't assist much when it comes to matters of political power, but I'll search for answers as to what can be done about returning everyone back to Earth." Rio gave a small

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shrug of his shoulders.

“I’m grateful for that, but not even the kingdom’s most renowned sorcerers know anything about returning to Earth. Of course, the kingdom could be lying, but do you know something?” Satsuki asked, staring into Rio’s face.

“Yes. I know that the hero summonings are a type of time-space sorcery. The Kingdom of Galarc must be aware of that too. However, because modern sorcery in the Strahl region can only use time-space sorcery at an elementary level and artifacts with it are so extremely rare, I think even the most well-known sorcerers in the kingdom wouldn’t know much.”

“I see…” Satsuki sighed heavily.

“What’s making it difficult to use easily, in my opinion, is the fact that destination coordinates are required to use teleportation sorcery. There’s just no way of finding the coordinates of Earth. I also cannot imagine the amount of magic essence required to move between this world and Earth.”

“…From the way you’re speaking, I’m guessing that you understand at least the first steps of using time-space sorcery?”

“I’ve only disclosed it to those close to me, but I do possess several magic artifacts of the sort,” Rio elaborated.

“…I could be wrong, but you’re some kind of weirdo, aren’t you? I mean, you do have a powerful enchanted sword too,” Satsuki said in half-exasperation.

“I suppose I am in possession of magic artifacts that would be considered rare in the Strahl region, and I may be carrying more secrets than the average person,” Rio answered with a hint of a wry smile.

“Umm, Satsuki. Mentioning this to the people of this kingdom would be…” Miharu said rather uneasily.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on speaking about this to anyone without Haruto’s permission. Even if Takahisa appears. I would never betray anyone who you and I are

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indebted to.” Satsuki nodded her head as she smiled brightly.

“Thank you so much,” Miharu said with a sigh of relief.

“Don’t thank me — I’m the one that should be grateful. By the way, I was wondering…” Satsuki tried to smile, but an odd look suddenly came over her. “…Assuming Takahisa is a hero as well, maybe the reason why you guys came to this world was because you were dragged into Takahisa and my summoning…?”

“Umm…” Miharu hesitated out of consideration for Satsuki, so Rio made the affirmation in her place.

“Probably.”

“…Right. I’m sorry.” Satsuki bowed her head.

“Oh, you don’t need to apologize. You were dragged into this against your will, too. It would have been just as possible that you would have been the one dragged in if Aki, Masato, or I were summoned as the hero instead,” Miharu pointed out in a fluster.

“You’re the one who was summoned directly, but that in itself is like being dragged into an accident. I don’t think you need to feel responsible for something that couldn’t have been prevented,” Rio noted.

“You two…” Satsuki bit her lip with a helpless expression.

“Anyways, what do we do? The original plan was to sneak out of the castle tonight to go meet Aki and Masato, but have you made a decision?” Rio asked Satsuki once more.

“…I’ll go. Please take me to see Aki and Masato. Please.” Satsuki gulped, making her request with determination.

“Are you sure?” Rio peered at Satsuki’s face in slight surprise.

“Yes. Sneaking out of the castle is against the rules, but the chance of being caught sounds fairly low, and I’m willing to take a few risks in order to meet Aki and Masato as soon as possible. Well, I may have hesitated a bit more if Miharu wasn’t here.”

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“Then bringing Miharu here in spite of the risks was the right choice after all.” Rio glanced at her with a small grin.

While revealing Miharu’s existence to the castle could bring unknown risks in the future, it was thanks to Miharu’s presence that their talk today had progressed so smoothly. If Rio had come to the castle and attempted to approach Satsuki alone, he would’ve struggled quite a bit more.

“No, Haruto is doing all these unnecessary things just for our sake. I should be the one taking risks, so please use me if my presence can be helpful in any way,” Miharu said, looking pained.

“...I’ll keep an eye out for any trouble heading Miharu’s way because of me. That’s why, Miharu, you don’t need to be considerate of me — you can express your thoughts openly to the king, and you can reject anything you don’t like and say what you want to do. Don’t sacrifice yourself just to accommodate others,” Satsuki reminded Miharu apologetically.

“Umm... Okay. Thank you very much.” Miharu smiled courageously and nodded.

...With that decided, Aishia — Can you go to the stone house and inform the others? Come back in two to three hours to help me carry Miharu and Satsuki, Rio communicated to Aishia through telepathy.

Got it, Aishia replied, before separating from Rio’s body while still in her spirit form.

“By the way, we’re departing later in the night, after the castle has quieted down, right?”

“Yes.” Rio nodded in confirmation.

“Then, the three of us should chat until then. Ah, speaking of which, there’s something I wanted to check...”

“What is it?”

“It’s about Liselotte. I know she’s the one who brought you guys here, but how much of your situation have you explained to her?” Satsuki asked.

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“A lot, you could say. We haven’t told her about Aki and Masato, but our conversations have delved pretty deep. In the same vein, how much have you noticed about her and the Ricca Guild?” Rio replied carefully.

“…I’ve noticed that the Ricca Guild’s products are called the exact same things as they are on Earth. The people in this world don’t seem to have noticed, so I figured there must be a secret behind it and never pointed it out,” Satsuki explained.

“You did well to realize that. You even had translation sorcery cast on you.” Rio widened his eyes in awe.

“Well, that translation sorcery is still a mystery and I’d be in a real pinch if it ever stopped working. It also doesn’t help me with reading and writing, so I’ve been testing things out and studying. And so, I noticed that the words I hear translated through the sorcery don’t match the movements of the speaker’s mouth, except for several of the Ricca Guild’s products that have identical mouth movements and sounds. It would be one thing if it were just one or two, but I couldn’t overlook so many as just a coincidence, you know?” Satsuki explained.

“If you’ve noticed that much, I guess it’d be safe to tell you. Like me, Liselotte has memories of her previous life.”

“Does that mean you’ve opened up to each other about your memories of your previous lives?”

“Yes. I’ve received permission from Liselotte to tell you this if you had noticed the secret of the Ricca Guild on your own.”

“I see. Then that means that she can be trusted for now, right?”

“Right. She *is* a noble of the Galarc Kingdom, which makes it hard to trust her unconditionally in that sense, but she will accommodate us to the best of her ability as long as it doesn’t oppose the kingdom. She’s also known for her good character as the governor of Amande as well,” Rio said,

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delving into Liselotte's personality traits.

"Got it — thank you. I want to thank her personally, too, so I'll talk to her next time." Satsuki smiled in relief to hear that Liselotte could be trusted for now.

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Chapter 4: Secret Reunion

Approximately two hours later…

“Your escort has arrived, so let’s get going soon.” Sensing Aishia’s presence, Rio called out to Miharu and Satsuki to signal their departure.

“What escort?” Satsuki tilted her head in confusion.

“I could carry the two of you by myself, but it would be easier with some help, so I called for backup. She’s on the balcony right now — I’m going to open it,” Rio said as he stood up and walked over to the balcony, opening the doors. There stood Aishia alone, wearing a black overcoat.

“…Who’s that?” Satsuki blinked blankly as Aishia came into her view.

“She’s going to help me carry you two. Her name is Aishia, and she’s a good friend of mine,” Rio said.

“Nice to meet you,” Aishia said briefly.

“N-Nice to meet you,” Satsuki replied, captivated by her appearance. She then turned to Miharu. “She’s very pretty and adorable. I’ve never seen anything like it…”

“Yes. I also thought the same when I first met her. Ai-chan is quiet, but she’s a very nice person,” Miharu happily introduced Aishia to Satsuki.

“I would love to get to know you better.” Satsuki glanced at Aishia with a smile.

“Sure,” Aishia nodded.

“What do you want to do? Either Aishia or I will be carrying you, but…” Rio glanced at Aishia as he asked Satsuki.

“Hmm. Could you carry me, Haruto? Aishia can carry Miharu,” Satsuki suggested, looking between Rio and

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Aishia's.

"Sure, I'm fine with that. But are you sure you want me to do it?"

"Yup. Miharu gets nervous when she's around boys, you know? She'd have to cling to you to be carried, but I don't really mind that kind of stuff. Is that okay with you, Miharu?" Satsuki answered Rio with a laugh, before looking at Miharu.

Miharu nodded after a slight pause. "...Y-Yes, of course. I'm counting on you, Ai-chan."

"Sure." Aishia nodded too.

"Then that's decided. There's nothing I need to bring, so I'm ready to go anytime," Satsuki said, walking over to the balcony where Rio and Aishia stood.

"Then I'm going to carry you, now," Rio said, standing in front of Satsuki.

"Yes, please do," Satsuki nodded softly.

"If you don't mind, then..." Rio said, picking Satsuki up in a bridal carry.

"Ah..." Satsuki flinched in surprise at how easily she was lifted up.

"We're going to fly like this — will you be okay?" Rio asked calmly.

"Y-Yeah. I'm fine, but am I too heavy?" said unsteadily.

"...No, of course not. You're light," Rio said with a chuckle, eyes widening. He was surprised at the contrast between the impression he had of her as an articulate and clear-headed woman compared to the girly, innocent side before him.

"Hmph, why are you laughing? I know I said don't mind this kind of thing, but you don't really get carried like this at this age, so it's like... it's just more embarrassing than I thought it would be!" Satsuki protested with scornful eyes.

"I'm sorry. With my physical body enhanced, it's easier to carry you this way than piggyback. I can hold onto you properly, so it's safer," Rio started explaining, but Satsuki

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objected to Rio as she pouted her lips.

"I-I know that. It's not like I was feeling conscious of being like this with you or anything!"

"Okay." Rio nodded as he broke into a small smile. Meanwhile, Miharu had also been lifted by Aishia and was watching Rio and Satsuki's exchange closely.

"We're ready as well," Aishia declared.

"Let's go, then. Please hold on tight." Rio kicked off the balcony floor with a stomp, and his body rose elegantly into the pitch-black sky.

"Uh…" Satsuki instinctively tightened her grip around Rio at the floating sensation she felt.

Am I actually flying? What… What is this? I'm floating? She tried to objectively analyze the gravity-defying phenomenon. However, it wasn't long until she stopped caring about it entirely. The higher they rose, the smaller the castle below her became, until her vision was filled with nothing but the starry sky.

"Wow! You're kidding me! It's so pretty!" Satsuki exclaimed in awe in spite of herself. Her voice could no longer reach the castle below her. "Hey, how amazing is this? Whoa! Look, Haruto! Miharu!" she called out with sparkling eyes. Miharu, flying nearby in Aishia's arms, watched Satsuki with a smile.

"I'm glad you're having fun," Rio said with a smile.

"Yeah, so much fun! I've never seen the moon and stars so up close before! I didn't know they could be so beautiful in this world too. Did you know?" Satsuki asked Rio, beaming innocently at him.

"I did know. Well, I'm not really conscious of it when I'm flying alone, though. I think it's very pretty today," Rio replied to his excited passenger with a faint smile.

"I see, so you knew already. Haha, I guess that's true. You can fly in the sky any time you want. But you're especially noticing it today, right? Right?" Satsuki accepted his

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response, laughing happily. She would have been a little sad to hear that she was the only one enjoying the beautiful night sky.

"Are you cold?" Rio asked Satsuki.

"Umm, just a little. There isn't much air resistance considering how fast we're flying, so it's a lot better than being hit directly by the wind…" It was currently summer in the Strahl region, but it cooled down more at night in comparison to Japan. Not to mention, being high in the air made it all the more chilly. Satsuki hadn't changed into her pajamas, so she was still in her day clothes, but a jacket would've been nice.

"I'll hurry to our meeting place, so please bear with it for a little longer."

"Yes, please make it an express ride! Ah, it's so cold." Satsuki nodded cheerfully and held on tighter to Rio, most likely trying to leech his warmth.

"I'm amazed at Satsuki. She's already bonded so much with Haruto…" Miharu muttered enviously, at the same time watching Satsuki with a look of admiration.

"You're doing your best too, Miharu. You've been trying to approach Haruto by yourself," Aishia said to Miharu quietly.

"Do you think so?" Miharu tilted her head a bit doubtfully.

"Yup. You should remain the way you are. Haruto understands your feelings perfectly." Aishia nodded, then followed after Rio as he quickened his pace a bit.

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Several minutes later, the group had flown entirely out of the capital, heading towards a rocky area off the main road. There were no lights, nor any signs of people below them.

"…Hey, how far are we going?" Satsuki asked Rio timidly, feeling slightly spooked.

"We've just arrived. I'm going to go down," Rio said with a

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huff of laughter, beginning his descent.

“Arrived where? …Wait, is that it?” Satsuki strained her eyes and looked down, but she couldn’t see very far because the ground was enveloped in darkness. However, she noticed that a faint light had turned on in the darkness.

“Did you notice something?” Rio, slightly wide-eyed, asked Satsuki.

“Yeah. The light of magic essence…”

“I’ve put up a sorcery barrier where we’re about to land. It has a weaker effect from above, but even then, only humans who can detect magic essence can notice the barrier. I guess you’re able to see magic essence.”

“…Yes. I can see it. I’ve heard that the people of this world are typically unable to see it, though,” Satsuki said, staring at Rio’s face in interest.

“This isn’t known among the general public, but you can learn to see it with some special training. Though in your case, it’s probably an effect of the divine arms’ power,” Rio guessed.

“I know I’m not one to speak, being a hero and all, but you’re a pretty extreme oddity,” Satsuki said to Rio with a wry smile. Rio grinned along with her.

Rio touched the surface of the barrier — immediately after, two voices called out for Satsuki. They belonged to, of course, Aki and Masato. Inside the barrier, the residents of the rock house had all lined up in anticipation of their arrival.

Furthermore, Orphia had created a ball of light to levitate in the air, illuminating the inside of the barrier in a way that was invisible to the outside.

“Aki! Masato!” As soon as Satsuki spotted Aki and Masato’s faces, she called their names with a bright grin. Aishia also entered the barrier carrying Miharu, and Rio landed in front of Aki.

“I’m glad that you two seem to be doing well!” Satsuki

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exclaimed happily.

"You too, Satsuki!"

"I'm so happy you're okay!"

Masato and Aki ran over to Rio, delighted to be reunited with Satsuki after a long time of being apart.

"Yes, thanks to Rio. I wanted to see you two so much, I asked him to bring me here!"

"I missed you too!" Aki said happily.

Meanwhile, standing a slight distance away was Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa, all staring at Satsuki with interest; she'd also noticed their presence.

Oh, wow. Aishia was already unbelievably adorable, but these other girls are all something else, aren't they?? I'd heard he was living together with girls, but with girls like these... Is Haruto collecting pretty faces? Satsuki directed her gaze at the lineup with interest, then looked up at Rio's face with scornful eyes.

"Umm, yes?" Rio tilted his head in a slightly worried manner.

"...No, it's nothing." Satsuki shook her head hesitantly before realizing she was still being bridal carried. She blushed. "Wait, how much longer are you going to carry me for?"

"Umm, I'd love to let you down, but I need you to let go of me first," Rio said with an amused smile.

"O-Oh, I'm s-sorry!" Satsuki realized she was the one holding onto Rio and released his clothes in a fluster.

"OK, I'm going to let you down, then." Rio gently placed Satsuki on the ground. Aki and Masato laughed in amusement, watching Satsuki.

"W-What are you laughing at, you two?" Satsuki asked them, blushing in embarrassment.

"Hmph, I'm sensing the arrival of yet another formidable rival," Latifa muttered, puffing her cheeks up adorably.

"Well, since it's Rio we're talking about, it can't be

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helped.” Celia pouted her lips a little before giggling softly.

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Rio introduced Celia and the others to Satsuki. Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma introduced themselves to Satsuki in order, leaving only Latifa.

Incidentally, because of the limited time they had at the stone house, they cut the extra explanations: Celia used her alias, Cecilia, and the others introduced themselves using artifacts to hide their true species.

“I’m Latifa, Onii-chan’s adopted sister,” Latifa said, concisely, to Satsuki.

“Haruto, you have an adopted sister?” Satsuki’s eyes widened slightly.

“Yes. I’m very proud of her. Although I wanted to introduce everyone in more detail, our time tonight is limited. Let’s go inside. The four of you from Earth should spend some time talking,” Rio said, inviting Satsuki into the house.

Satsuki nodded cheerfully, before tilting her head in confusion. “Yeah… Wait, house?” As far as she could see, there was nothing but boulders before her eyes — both inside and outside the barrier.

“It might be hard to tell, but this boulder is a house. The entrance is over there,” Rio explained, looking up at the stone house beside them.

“Oh, I see it now. I thought it was just an oddly large boulder…” When Satsuki spotted the entrance, her eyes widened in wonder. Upon closer inspection, there were window-like sections and benches and ladders placed here and there, showing the area was lived in.

“This way.” Rio guided Satsuki towards the entrance, but Latifa walked there first and opened the wooden door ahead of them.

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“Here you go!” Latifa brightly invited Satsuki inside.

“Thanks, Latifa,” Rio and Satsuki said, then one at a time they went inside. Everyone else followed after them.

“Could you please take off your shoes? The shoe box is right over there,” Rio said to Satsuki. Before them was a huge living room.

Incidentally, while the interior looked nothing like Japanese-style architecture, because Rio was the owner of the house and a former Japanese person, everyone made sure to remove their shoes inside. Thanks to that, the inside of the house was clean enough to relax anywhere.

“Wow, it actually functions as a house. It looks even more comfortable than my rooms at the castle… it makes me want to lay on the floor and relax.” Satsuki stood frozen at the entrance, staring at the living room in awe.

“I know, right? I’m living here more comfortably than I was in Japan. Though we don’t have any electronic appliances here,” Masato said earnestly, standing behind Satsuki.

“Oh, wow. I see.” A slightly strained smile appeared on Satsuki’s face.

“Aki, can you show Satsuki to my room? I’m going to go prepare some tea.” Miharu instructed Aki before heading to the kitchen.

“I can prepare the tea, Miharu, so you should go talk with Satsuki, since you have to return in the morning,” Orphia urged.

“…Okay, thank you, Orphia. Follow me then, Satsuki.” Miharu started showing Satsuki the way to her room with Aki and Masato. Rio and the others were left in the living room, and Orphia headed to the kitchen to make tea.

“Professor, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Could we discuss it in my room?” Rio asked Celia.

Celia paused for a second, but replied with a nod. “…Yes, of course. I have something I wanted to discuss too.”

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“So, what did you want to talk about?” Once they’d moved to Rio’s room, Celia sat down on the chair that he’d offered to her.

“It’s about the banquet. I heard some information regarding the Beltrum Kingdom, so I wanted you to be aware, just in case.”

“Really?” Celia’s eyes widened quite a bit.

“Yes. You already know that the hero of Duke Huguenot’s faction will be attending, but it seems like the main hero from Beltrum Kingdom will be there too. In other words, the government of the Beltrum Kingdom may come face-to-face with Duke Huguenot’s faction at the banquet.”

“…The current Beltrum Kingdom has been keeping a distance from the Galarc Kingdom, but they aren’t very peaceful with each other. Could they possibly have an underlying diplomatic motive?”

“That, or something could’ve happened within the kingdom itself. Even if that weren’t the case, the heroes from Galarc, Centostella, and Duke Huguenot’s faction will all be in attendance, so there’s the possibility of some kind of military ploy,” Rio explained, listing all the plausible options.

“Something could’ve happened after I ran away. …No, something could’ve happened *because* I ran from the wedding. Duke Arbor’s family must’ve lost their honor entirely, making it difficult to control the dissatisfied nobles, or something like that?” Celia’s face clouded with regret as she considered that she might be to blame for causing the drama.

“Even if something did happen, it wasn’t your fault. That is, even if the suspension of your wedding had impacted domestic affairs,” Rio stated firmly.

“Rio…” Celia bit her lip as an indescribable pain ran

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through her chest.

“If there’s anything you wish to do, please tell me. If there’s anything I can do, please tell me. I’ll make it happen. I took you away from there for this purpose. So please — don’t forget the decision you made at the wedding. Please rely on me.” Rio looked Celia dead in the eye. Before Celia knew it, the pain in her chest had disappeared, replaced with the intense throbbing of her heartbeat.

“O-Okay. Thank you. Right, I remember now. What I felt back then…” Celia smiled bashfully, her cheeks blushing faintly.

I don’t want to cause Rio any trouble. But I’m allowed to, right? I can rely on him, right? She stared right back into Rio’s face.

“Umm, Rio. I… I want to go back home to see my father. That’s why…” Celia mustered up her courage to speak frankly.

“Of course — I’ll accompany you. It will have to be after the banquet ends and everything with Miharu has settled, though…” Rio offered immediately.

“Geez, you’re always so quick to respond. …But, I’m happy. Thank you. Of course I’m fine with that. Thank you for taking care of me, Rio.” Celia laughed shyly, bowing her head.

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Meanwhile, in Miharu’s room, Satsuki was happily spending time together with Miharu, Aki, and Masato. Miharu and Satsuki were sitting down on the bed together, while Aki and Masato sat on chairs.

“When Miharu was put in a different carriage, I honestly thought we were doomed. Aki even started crying,” Masato said, recounting the events that happened right after they wandered into this world.

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“W-What?! T-That’s not true!” Aki shouted, embarrassed, in a fluster.

“Liar. You were a mess — throwing a tantrum and wailing like a baby.”

“I said I wasn’t! Anyway, you were so scared, you couldn’t even do anything!”

“Ah, well… I was unarmed back then.”

Masato and Aki were bantering with each other over nothing, like usual. Normally, this would have led into a light siblings’ quarrel, but…

“Heh… hehe… ahaha!” Satsuki started laughing, which made Aki and Masato stop arguing.

“Umm, Satsuki?” Miharu cocked her head.

“Ah, it’s just so funny. Sorry for laughing so suddenly.”

“I mean, it’s fine. What was so funny, though?” Masato asked in confusion.

“It just reminded me of the way you two teased each other when we were still in Japan. It’s been so long since I’ve seen it, I lost my cool for a sec. It was very healing. Aki, Masato… I’m so glad you two are doing well,” Satsuki said.

“Ah, I see.” Masato smiled bashfully.

“Ahaha, normally Takahisa or Miharu would’ve stopped us before it got too heated, though,” Aki said with a sad look, remembering her brother.

“…I still don’t know where Takahisa is, either.” Sensing the change in Aki, Satsuki also spoke with a gloomy look. She had predicted the possibility of him being the hero of Centostella, but she wasn’t certain.

“Right…” Aki bit down on her lip and nodded. Although she already knew that from when Aishia came to inform them of the visit, hearing it again made her heart feel heavy.

“I’ll notify you two as soon as we receive any confirmed information regarding Takahisa. There’s just one thing I want to ask, though. What will you do if he’s discovered?” Satsuki asked. Miharu’s eyes widened in surprise.

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“I want to see him, obviously!” Aki replied fiercely.

“Same with you, Masato?” Satsuki checked.

“Well, yeah. If we’re both alive, I’d want to see him,” Masato replied a bit shyly.

“Would you feel the same way even if he belonged to another kingdom as its hero?” Satsuki pressed.

“…Yes.”

“Yeah, I have lots I want to tell him anyways.” Aki and Masato nodded their heads.

“What are you planning to do after you see Takahisa, then? Haruto is taking care of you at the moment, but would you let Takahisa’s kingdom take care of you instead? Of course, if it seems like Galarc Kingdom will treat you well too, you could stay here… Or asking Haruto to keep taking care of you is another choice…” Satsuki asked, digging deeper with her line of questioning.

“We did talk a lot about that before coming here, but…” Aki started somewhat hesitantly.

“You haven’t made a decision yet?”

“…Yeah.”

“I think you understand already, right? That not everyone’s decision may be the same,” Satsuki guessed. Aki’s expression stiffened as if she had hit the nail on the head.

“Well, we had a vague idea it could happen, so we were mindful not to delve too deep into the topic,” Masato said, scratching his head uncomfortably.

Although Rio had been taking care of them until now, there was the possibility they would each live separately from now on, depending on the choices they made.

“It’s fine with me as long as you understand it. Really, I’m probably interfering too much. You’ll know the answer when the time comes, so let’s discuss it when we’re all together,” Satsuki grinned, shrugging her shoulders rather excessively as she looked at Miharu.

“…Okay.” Miharu looked back at Satsuki and nodded

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apologetically. Meanwhile, Aki was watching Miharu somewhat anxiously.

“Hmm… The topic got all serious, so I’m kind of tired now. We were finally able to reunite with this limited time, so we should use it to talk about more fun topics. Oh, that’s right! Tell me more about this house. It seemed pretty big, so I’d love to have a tour.” Satsuki smiled brightly and changed the topic.

“Hmm… There are a lot of rooms similar to this one, but it might be worth having a look at the gigantic bed in Haruto’s room. I’ve never seen a bed that big before in Japan,” Masato said.

“Wow, so he sleeps in such a big bed all alone?” Satsuki’s eyes widened.

“Well, not really. Latifa and Aishia sleep with him sometimes, which occasionally causes a bit of a commotion…” Aki broke into an amused grin, reminded of those times.

“Wait, he sleeps together with his little sister and Aishia?!” Satsuki exclaimed in surprise.

“The two of them sneak into his bed while he’s sleeping. Cecilia and Sara often find them and scold them about it,” Aki explained with a hint of a wry smile.

“Oh, I see… Well, you can show me that bed later. Are there any other interesting places you can tell me about?” Satsuki grinned happily, having landed upon an interesting piece of information.

“Hmm… The only other place I can think of is the bathtub,” Masato said, cocking his head.

“How nice — a bathtub! I’d love to stretch my arms and legs and take a long, warm bath. The castle has a splendid bathtub too, but the soaps aren’t anything to write home about, and there aren’t any bathtubs like the ones you would see in Japan…” Satsuki’s face lit up as she longingly spoke of Japanese-style bathtubs.

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“Do you want to ask Haruto if you can take a bath here, then? We have a bathtub made of stone and a wooden tub as well,” Aki offered.

“Oh, that sounds nice. The perfect combination,” Satsuki responded enthusiastically, her smile pure.

“We also have a nice collection of soaps, so I’m sure you’ll like it,” Miharu added.

“I look forward to seeing that! Wait. Wait, what?! I let my guard down and just went along with the conversation, but… what?! Y-You have one in this house? Really? A Japanese-style bath?” Satsuki had been smiling broadly before she noticed something odd with the conversation. She gasped at Miharu.

“Yes, although it’s more like a hot spring than a Japanese-style bath.” Miharu laughed in amusement.

At that, a fire ignited in Satsuki’s eyes. “Oh my god, a hot spring?” she gulped.

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Meanwhile, Rio finished speaking with Celia and returned to the living room. Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were gathered there as well.

“Welcome back, Onii-chan! Did you finish talking? Come — sit down, sit down!” Latifa immediately called Rio to the spot on the sofa between her and Aishia. Aishia shifted to the side, as if reading Latifa’s mind, creating a space for Rio to fit between them.

“Oh, thanks.” Rio sat in the space between them as though this was a natural occurrence. On the other hand, Celia reluctantly lowered herself into the empty one-seater sofa.

“Onii-chan energy — recharge!” Latifa announced, immediately clinging to Rio’s right side.

“Hmph.” The other girls looked bitter, as if they wanted to say something, but it was a little sister’s right to be doted on

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by her brother, after all.

“Ehehe!” Latifa beamed in satisfaction, enjoying Rio’s attention.

Meanwhile, Aishia didn’t attach herself to Rio as closely as Latifa had, but leaned in enough to toe the line of Celia giving a warning. At times like this, Aishia and Latifa were the only ones that could get this close to Rio, making them extremely formidable.

“Umm, why’s everyone so quiet?” Rio asked, noticing that he was being stared at by Celia, Sara, Orphia and Alma.

Celia sighed in exasperation. “Huh? Isn’t it because we just arrived? What were you guys talking about before?” she asked Sara.

“We were talking about Miharu’s friend, Satsuki. Just wondering what kind of person she is,” Sara answered with a faint smile. At that very moment, the door to Miharu’s room opened to reveal Miharu and Satsuki.

Satsuki’s eyes widened when she spotted Rio sandwiched between Aishia and Latifa, but she called out to him with a grin. “...Hey, Haruto. I have a favor I’d like to ask.” Beside her, Miharu was also giggling in amusement.

“Yes, what is it?” Rio stiffened, feeling a strange presence coming from Satsuki.

“Umm, I’d like to use the bathtub. Is that okay?” Satsuki said with a completely serious expression, clasping her hands together as she pleaded.

“S-Sure. Feel free to help yourself.” The anticlimactic answer drained the strength in Rio’s shoulders, making him agree in relief.

“Really? You’re sure? Thank you!” Satsuki laughed happily.

“It’s just a bathtub — I don’t mind if you use it,” Rio said in amusement, lips turning upwards into a smile.

“What are you saying! When you want to use someone else’s bathtub, it’s only polite to ask the owner of the house

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for their approval," Satsuki said, as though she were pointing out the obvious.

"When we told her about the bathtub in this house, Satsuki leaped out the door saying she'd ask you herself," Miharu giggled.

"That just shows how important that information was to me, gosh." Satsuki's cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

"In that case, please ask Miharu about how to use the bathroom," Rio said.

"Yup. Also, would anyone else like to join us? I'd love to have the chance to talk to everyone." Satsuki nodded eagerly, turning to address the group of women.

"Us too?" Sara muttered, exchanging a look with Celia and the others.

"Please go enjoy yourselves," Rio urged them. "Masato and I will wait out here."

"Ahaha, I should have known... Right..." Masato seemed a little disappointed, laughing bitterly.

"What, did you want to join us too?" Aki shot Masato a dull look, sighing tiredly.

Masato's face flushed. "N-No! Just go already!"

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"It's so spacious..." Satsuki opened the door to the bathroom and froze in astonishment. The changing room was already large to begin with, and she had nearly yelled "is this a holiday inn?!" when she saw the curtain hanging over the entrance, but none of that could compare to this.

This was definitely a holiday inn. Seeing the bare rock surfaces, artifact-powered bubbling water, and steam filling the entire room had her heart pounding in elation she couldn't hold back.

"Apparently the water is made through sorcery, but isn't it just like a hot spring?" Miharu said to Satsuki with a smile,

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her naked body hidden behind a towel.

“Yeah, this is the best…” Satsuki replied in a daze.

“Come this way — I’ll explain the different soaps and how to use the water.”

“Please do!” Satsuki followed Miharu to the washing area. While it was a little bit cramped with this many people using it all at once, they took turns and compromised with each other’s time. They formed pairs of Miharu and Satsuki, Celia and Latifa, Sara and Alma, and Aishia and Orphia, each helping wash the other’s back.

“Oh, it smells wonderful. If only the bath at the castle had this soap… There’s only a limited amount of hot water, too. Now it feels weird to wonder how a house like this was built in a rocky area in the middle of nowhere.” Satsuki was spellbound by the soap bubbles enveloping her body and sighed at the inadequacy of the castle’s facilities.

“Ahaha, the bathing facilities at the royal castle are meant to be the best in the Strahl region, but once you’ve experienced this house’s bathroom…” Celia said with a smile of exasperation, washing Latifa’s hair beside them.

“Onii-chan made all the soaps in the bathroom, you know!” Latifa added. For the record, Celia’s hair color was still being altered and Latifa still had the accessory-shaped magic artifact to hide her ears and tail.

“I’m shocked… I heard he could cook as well. What can’t Haruto do?” Satsuki said, her eyes widening.

“That’s right, he’s good at pouring tea too. Miharu and Orphia are good as well, so we always have great tea in this house. Snacks, too, of course,” Celia said happily.

“Miharu and Orphia are the ones in charge of making snacks, though. The scones and jam they made last time were something else.” Latifa started drooling at the memory of the taste.

“The more I listen, the more this house sounds like a better place to live in than the castle…” Satsuki said with a

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small sigh, showing a hint of a bitter smile.

"What's life normally like living at the castle?" Miharu asked in curiosity, washing the water from Satsuki's back.

"Well, it's boring. I wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, study things about this world, eat lunch, exercise a bit to help digestion, study, exercise… By the time I stop, it's nighttime and another day is over, I guess?" Satsuki described with a dry smile.

"I thought you would've interacted with the king and other nobility more, being a hero." Miharu was a little surprised.

"That was partly out of my own request to be treated as an open secret until the reveal at the banquet, so I haven't met any nobles yet. Well, I do see the royalty a lot instead, though. You met Michel and Char, right? There are other royals too, but I see those two the most often."

"Princess Charlotte seemed like a very friendly and carefree person. You're close to her too, right?"

"Yup. Well, I suppose she's one of the few friends I've made in this world so far. She may seem friendly, but you can't let your guard down around her."

"Has it been hard after all? The king seemed like he treated you well, but…" Miharu asked worriedly.

"Yeah, well enough. Outwardly, he's so nice it's almost scary, but that's probably because I have value to him. I let him be nice because I wouldn't be able to live comfortably otherwise, so in a way, we're using each other. But I've become suspicious that there's something behind every move he makes, so my biggest worry is my own mental fatigue." Satsuki smiled in a way that showed exactly that.

That's why I'd honestly prefer living with Aki and Masato — and, if possible, Miharu — not in a place like that. That's what I truly feel, but I suppose it won't work out that way… she thought, sighing quietly.

"If I were to give you advice as the eldest of this house, it

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would be to make one friend that you can trust from the bottom of your heart — someone you can tell anything to," Celia said, seeing that she had experience being born and raised in noble society.

"Eh?" Satsuki looked extremely confused.

"...H-Huh? Did I say something weird?" Celia replayed her last words over in her head, wondering if she had said the wrong thing.

"N-No, that's not it... Umm, this may be impolite of me, but may I ask how old you are, Cecilia? You just said you were the eldest..."

"Umm... T-Twenty-one..." Celia stated in embarrassment.

"...EEEEH?!" Satsuki yelled in great amazement. That attracted the attention of Aki and Sara's group, who were talking amongst themselves elsewhere.

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“N-No way, you don’t look it at all! There’s just no way! I honestly thought you were somewhere between Aki and Miharu in age! Ah, s-sorry, I didn’t mean to yell so loudly!” Satsuki explained her surprise and apologized to Aki and Sara.

“Ahaha, thank you. Being told that by the hero gives me confidence.” Celia laughed in amusement.

“I’m the one losing confidence here. Cecilia’s so beautiful and young.” Satsuki exhaled, looking over Celia’s body.

“I have the body of a child, so it’s embarrassing when people stare…” Celia paused in washing Latifa’s hair and shyly hid her body with her hands.

“Don’t say that. Let me see your hands…” Satsuki grasped Celia’s hands and inspected them up close. “See, your skin is so clear and white like snow, it makes me envious as another woman! I wish I were like that!”

“That’s thanks to the soap in this house, I think? Miharu and Latifa look the same, and I’m not as pretty as the other people in this house,” Celia said, placing emphasis on the effect of the various soaps Rio made.

“No no, everyone in this house is unbelievably cute, but you’re also included in that count, you know?” Satsuki said to Celia in disbelief.

“N-No way, I don’t think that’s true at all. If you want, you can check Miharu’s skin for yourself. Her skin’s super soft,” Celia said.

“…Huh?” Miharu paused in washing Satsuki’s back, looking like a deer in headlights.

“It’s time to check Miharu’s skin, then!” Satsuki whipped around and swiftly made her way behind Miharu.

“Y-You’re fast! Wait, what? S-Satsuki?! W-Where are you touching — kyah?!” Miharu flinched out of her skin.

“Wow, this certainly is something…” Satsuki excitedly moved both her hands, groping Miharu’s body with a gentle touch.

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“T-That tickles. Please don’t s-squeeze either!” Miharu squirmed, cheeks turning bright red.

“Now now, the bubbles make everything more slippery, so don’t thrash around and just show me. You’ve grown so much in the time we’ve been apart.” A flame had been lit in Satsuki’s mischievous heart, spurring on her teasing. It seemed to help release the stress she had suppressed since coming to this world, as her smile was truly vibrant.

After that, though it was only for ten seconds or so, their squabble continued until Satsuki was satisfied for the time being and went about washing Miharu’s back. “Ah, that was fun. Thanks, Miharu.”

“Geez. You can be so mean sometimes, Satsuki.” Miharu stopped resisting and turned in her seat to look up at Satsuki with a rare pout.

“Ahaha, I’m sorry. It’s been so long since the last time I saw you… I just had to have some skin-to-skin contact with you. Which means it’s Aki’s turn next, yes?” Satsuki said, turning to look at Aki, who had been watching their exchange.

“I-I’m fine as is!” Aki covered her body with both hands, shaking her head in a fluster.

“Ahaha, I see. That’s too bad,” Satsuki giggled.

“You’re exactly the person that Miharu and the others described to us, Satsuki.” Celia smiled with a giggle.

“Really? Hmm, I wonder what kind of things they said.” Satsuki grinned, whispering into Miharu’s ear.

“I-I didn’t say anything weird!” Miharu clarified in a fluster.

“It’s okay, I know. Anyway, Haruto and Masato must be two happy people. Being able to live here surrounded by so many cute girls,” Satsuki said, turning around to look around at all the girls in the bathroom.

“Ahaha, it’s a house full of women, so we might actually be causing them more mental exhaustion than anything,”

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Celia said with a faint smile.

"Maybe for Haruto, but you don't need to say anything nice about Masato. He's weak to older, beautiful women," Aki said with a sigh.

"That's boys for you. It can't be helped. And aren't women weak to handsome men too? Men like Haruto." Satsuki giggled as she brought up Rio as an example, making some of the girls flinch. A fair number of them did, actually.

Hmm. Haruto said there was nothing romantic going on at all in this house, but could he be… No, he's very clearly thickheaded, isn't he? Satsuki thought to herself.

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After their bath, Satsuki and the others continued their conversations until it was finally time for Satsuki to return to her room at the castle. All of the occupants of the house gathered out front to send Rio, Miharu, Satsuki, and Aishia off.

"I'm so sorry for intruding and making such a fuss in the middle of the night. But I'm honestly so glad to have met everyone. Thank you very much," Satsuki said in parting, facing the residents of the stone house and bowing her head deeply.

"Come again anytime, Satsuki!" Latifa called out. She had grown a lot closer to Satsuki in the short time they had spent together.

"Yes. Let's all take a bath together again," Celia said cheerfully.

"Hopefully we'll have more time to talk next time," Sara added.

"Next time, we'll have a meal prepared!"

"It'll probably require sneaking out at night like today, so that would be bad for the figure… Well, maybe something light would be fine," Orphia and Alma added.

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“Please do! If there’s another chance, I’d love to visit again! I’ll be relying on you two to make it happen again, Haruto and Aishia,” Satsuki replied happily, then shot a teasing wink at Rio and the others.

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Afterward, Rio and Aishia returned Miharu and Satsuki to the tower of the castle, entering Satsuki’s chambers through the balcony. Incidentally, Aishia made as though she was returning to the stone house when she returned to Rio in her spirit form.

However, dawn was already upon them, and sleeping right now would make it quite difficult to get up when it was time to be woken up, so Satsuki used her quick wit. There were guards in the passage outside her quarters, so she informed them that she’d stayed up too late that night, and that she wanted to sleep until midday in preparation for the banquet. Having secured enough time to sleep, Satsuki, Miharu, and Rio retreated to their rooms.

“Good night then, Haruto.”

“Good night, Haruto.”

Satsuki and Miharu headed for the same bedroom.

“Yes, good night.” Rio headed for another bedroom alone and sat down on the bed. He proceeded to take off his shoes and flop backwards.

Today was a little tiring… though that’s to be expected, Rio thought vaguely.

“Haruto.” Aishia suddenly appeared in her material form before Rio.

“Thanks for today, Aishia. You must be tired too — you should get some rest.” Rio wasn’t particularly surprised, replying as though he expected Aishia to be there.

“I have something to say,” Aishia said, revealing the reason for her sudden materialization.

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“What is it?” Rio cocked his head and asked, as though he expected something when she had gone out of her way to appear.

“It’s about Miharu.”

“…Go on,” Rio said slowly.

“Will you tell her? About being Haruto,” Aishia asked bluntly.

“I guess you saw through me after all, huh? That’s right — she’s met up with Satsuki again, so I think it’s about time to do it. I’ll tell them about how, at worst, they might not be able to return to Earth, and everything about me. I can’t stay silent about it forever,” Rio said, looking gloomy in self-depreciation.

“Miharu wants to be with you, Haruto.”

“Miharu wants to stay with everyone, not me.”

“But you’re definitely included in that,” Aishia said smoothly.

“If so… I’d be happy… But…” Rio said sadly, a conflicted expression on his face.

“Do you think you’re not allowed to be with Miharu?” Aishia read what Rio was about to say and said it first.

“…I’m trying to enact revenge. Anyone too close to me may get dragged into it. It’d be best to have her live somewhere safe, no?” Rio said guiltily, as though he was giving an excuse.

“Don’t you want to keep Miharu with you as well? Don’t you want her by your side?”

“I can’t turn back anymore. That’s why I can’t get too deeply involved with Miharu,” Rio replied, neither confirming nor denying her statements.

“Miharu said she wanted to stay with you, Haruto.”

“That’s because Miharu doesn’t know my true self yet. I’m not the Amakawa Haruto Miharu knows right now.”

“Haruto is Haruto. Even with your previous life as Haruto mixed into your current personality, you’ve inherited the

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essence of that Haruto," Aishia said encouragingly.

"Thanks, Aishia," he said with relief in his expression.

Aishia walked up to Rio and gently placed her hand against his cheek. "When you tell Miharu the truth, make sure you listen to her words properly. The same for everyone else. Even if you're scared, you can't run. Listen to what they say to you carefully."

"...All right." Rio gave an anxious smile and nodded his head slowly.

"Then all that's left is for you to tell Miharu and everyone else the truth," said Aishia.

"...Either during the banquet, or afterward. If there's a chance, I intend on telling her. There's a lot of things I need to do, but once everything's settled, I'm going to start searching for that man seriously," Rio said a little hesitantly, before taking a deep breath, as if in resolve.

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Chapter 5: Banquet, Day 1

Thanks to the plenty of rest they got after returning to the castle, Rio and the others were able to welcome the first day of the banquet in perfectly alert condition. Shortly after they got up at midday, a light meal was brought to their dining room to serve as breakfast and lunch, which the three of them ate.

“Before we dig in, let me tell you the plans for today that were passed on to me. We’ll be preparing for attendance at the banquet in the dressing room after this, but Miharu and I will take longer to get dressed up, so we’ll be separated for a while. Haruto, once you’re done changing, you’ll be meeting up with Liselotte. The details will be given to you by your assigned guide, so ask that person anything you have questions about,” Satsuki informed Rio. Servants of the castle had brought a light meal to their room earlier and passed that message onto Satsuki.

“Understood. Please look after Miharu before and during the banquet.” Rio smiled with a nod, looking at Miharu.

“Of course. But it’ll be your role to escort Miharu during the banquet, so make sure you fix yourself up real handsomely to be worthy of standing next to her.” Satsuki puffed up her chest and winked at Rio to urge him on.

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Several hours later, Rio changed into his formalwear early and was led to the waiting room of the hall for social events, which was adjacent to the royal castle. He entered the waiting room to see the members of the Duke Cretia family

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present.

“Hello, Haruto. Good to see you again.” The head of the family, Cedric Cretia welcomed Rio warmly.

“I apologize for my tardy arrival. Thank you very much for your hospitality yesterday. I’m also very sorry for causing an inconvenience by suddenly changing our plans. Please forgive me,” Rio said, placing his right hand over his chest and bowing his head deeply.

“Hahaha, how sincere. There’s no need to let it bother you. It was an order from His Majesty and the hero, after all. No one imagined you’d be invited to stay in the hero’s quarters, but it’s fine. Now, come this way. I shall introduce you to the family members you haven’t met. This is my son George and his fiancée, Colette,” Cedric said, inviting Rio over to the sofa where they were seated. There, seated beside Liselotte and Cedric’s wife Julianne, was a young man in his twenties and a girl in her mid-teens, each wearing formal outfits.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Liselotte’s older brother, the second son of the Cretia family, George. It’s an honor to meet the rumored hero. Thank you for saving my little sister from her predicament.” George stood up and introduced himself to Rio cheerily.

“I’m Lord George’s fiancée, Colette Valier. I’ve heard Sir Haruto is the same age as me—it’s very nice to meet you.” Colette also stood up, pinching the hem of her dress in a graceful greeting.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Haruto. I unfortunately do not have a last name I can offer you, but I ask that you treat me well today nonetheless,” Rio said respectfully with his right hand over his chest.

“No one here will look down on you for not being of nobility. Please, have a seat,” Cedric said warmly.

“Thank you very much. Excuse me, then.” Rio approached the sofa where Cedric’s family was gathered.

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“Sir Haruto, your outfit suits you very well,” Liselotte complemented, then offered Rio the seat beside her. “Please, sit here.”

“I’m honored. I purchased this from a Ricca Guild branch, actually. I’m sure you’ve heard this many times already, but you look very beautiful today, Lady Liselotte.” Rio smiled as he praised Liselotte. She was truly a lovely sight all dressed up — elegant and somewhat mystical. Her pale blue hair that reached her back was set in an upswept style, held in place with a rose hair brooch. Furthermore, her dress was an even paler shade of blue, matching her similarly-colored hair. A large ribbon was attached to her back in a way that resembled another rose. There was no doubt she would attract the attention of all the men present as soon as she entered the banquet.

“Why, thank you very much.” Liselotte smiled happily.

“Oh? It’s rare to see Liselotte this shy,” her brother said with a teasing smile.

“George?” Liselotte looked at him cheerfully.

“Hahaha, pretend you didn’t hear that, Haruto.” George laughed loudly to cover up his comment.

Liselotte pouted faintly, then pulled herself together. “Geez. That aside, how was your stay in Lady Satsuki’s chambers?”

“Yes, we had the privilege of chatting about many things. Lady Satsuki was also delighted to be reunited with Miharu and be able to speak to her again. She said it was all thanks to your efforts, Lady Liselotte,” Rio said. For the record, Liselotte wasn’t aware of their plans to sneak out of the castle.

“That’s good to hear, but I was merely the mediator. If anything, I was given the chance to meet the hero before the banquet through you, Haruto, so I was very happy with that,” Liselotte said with a pleased smile.

“I did nothing… but Lady Satsuki was also delighted to be

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able to talk to you, Lady Liselotte. She seemed to hold quite some interest in the Ricca Guild, so Miharu and I told her all about it."

"Is that so? Thank you very much."

To an outsider listening in their conversation would have seemed mundane, but in reality, Rio was informing Liselotte that Satsuki had noticed the secret of the Ricca Guild through his words.

Just then, someone knocked on the waiting room door.

"Oh, that must be Lady Satsuki and Miharu," Cedric said, prompting Rio and the others to look at the door. The soldier that had been posted before the door entered the room.

"Excuse me. Sir Hiroaki Sakata, Princess Flora Beltrum, and Lady Roanna Fontaine from the Kingdom of Beltrum are requesting permission to give their greetings before the banquet. Shall I allow them entry?"

"Why, if such important people are visiting, we must greet them. Please, let them through."

"Right away!" At Cedric's order, the soldier swiftly exited the room and invited Hiroaki and the others inside. Cedric and his family, meanwhile, stood up to await their entrance.

When Hiroaki entered the room and spotted Liselotte, he greeted her with a pleased expression. "Hey, Liselotte."

Liselotte raised her head. "It's been three weeks, hasn't it? Welcome, great hero," she replied with a smile pasted on her face.

"...Yeah, but that aside..." Hiroaki stared at Liselotte in her dress. He seemed to become a bit shy. "That dress looks really nice on you," he said in a somewhat flustered tone.

"Thank you. It's my favorite dress."

"Huh — is that so. Well, I think it's cute."

"Hehe, you flatter me as always. Princess Flora, Lady Roanna — I'm glad to see you are well," Liselotte replied to Hiroaki with a friendly smile, before turning to address

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Flora and Roanna cheerfully. Of course, Hiroaki was also in his formal outfit: a pure white military-style suit with gold embroidery.

"I apologize for intruding on your valuable relaxation time. And, umm, it's nice to see you again too, Sir Haruto." Flora apologized for the sudden visit while looking around the room in search of someone. When she spotted Rio's face, she addressed him nervously.

Flora was currently wearing a pale purple dress to match her hair color, which was half-tied up. Her appearance was cute enough to compare favorably with Liselotte.

"It's been a while, Princess Flora, Sir Hiroaki, Lady Roanna." Rio showed no particular change in expression as he greeted Flora and the others.

Hiroaki belatedly noticed Rio was beside Liselotte and spoke up with a small shrug. "Ah, I knew you'd be accompanying Liselotte here to this banquet."

"Both Lady Liselotte and Sir Haruto took great care of us during our stay in Amande. I'm delighted to see you both again." Roanna grasped the hem of her yellow dress and addressed Liselotte and Rio in a friendly manner.

"No, you helped us out a great deal then too. Is Duke Huguenot doing well?" Liselotte asked, frowning.

"Yes, the injury in his abdomen has healed completely, so he will be in attendance tonight at the banquet. I believe you'll be able to meet him yourself later," Roanna informed her.

"I look forward to that. Oh, that aside, allow me to introduce you to my family. This is my father, Cedric, and my mother, Julianne. And this here is my older brother, George, and his fiancée, Colette."

"I am Cedric, Liselotte's father and the current head of the Duke Cretia house." Cedric respectfully placed his right hand over his chest. "I have had the honor of being in the presence of Princess Flora several times while fulfilling my duties as

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the ambassador of the Galarc Kingdom. It has been a long time since we last met. Furthermore, I believe this is my first time meeting the hero and Miss Roanna."

"It's been a long time, Duke Cretia," Flora said.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Roanna Fontaine."

Flora and Roanna both returned the greetings in an experienced manner, acting like the royal and noble ladies they were. Meanwhile —

"Yeah, sure. Oh, I'm Hiroaki Sakata. Nice to meet you." Hiroaki seemed to be a little nervous in front of Liselotte's father, as his tone was a bit stiffer than usual as he introduced himself.

"Please don't feel nervous before me, great hero," Cedric said in a friendly manner.

"No, it's my bad. I'm just not very good at speaking politely and there'll be tons of other kingdom royals in attendance at the banquet, so Roanna warned me to be aware of things like that." Hiroaki gave a bitter grimace as he looked at Roanna, who heaved a small sigh.

I see. Like Liselotte said, there's no mistaking that she's practically acting as the hero's assistant, Cedric thought, seeing through Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna's relationship in an instant.

"However, the one dubbed as hero is an existence on par with the king. While it wouldn't be favorable to be too disrespectful, I doubt there will be any problems with how you spoke just now," Cedric said with a sociable smile.

"As expected of Liselotte's father. You sure get it." Hiroaki's mouth turned upwards in a pleased smile. Just then, another knock came from the door.

"Oh, it must be Lady Satsuki and Miharu this time. Enter." Everyone inside the room turned their gazes towards the door as it opened.

"Excuse me. The hero, Lady Satsuki Sumeragi, her friend, Lady Miharu Ayase, and Princess Charlotte have arrived.

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Please enter,” the guard said. With the exception of Hiroaki and Flora, everyone present lowered their heads in wait.

“My, this is quite a gathering. And if it isn’t Princess Flora. Long time no see,” Charlotte said.

“It’s good to see you again, Princess Charlotte,” Flora said, bowing. Meanwhile, Hiroaki was entranced by the sight of Satsuki, Miharu, and Charlotte in their dresses, ogling them intently. Satsuki was in a deep purple dress, Miharu was in a pale black dress, and Charlotte was wearing an orange-tinted dress, each emitting a mature feminine charm.

“Everyone, please raise your heads. There’s still a little time before the banquet commences, but I’d like to introduce you all first. This is the hero, Lady Satsuki, and her good friend Lady Miharu,” Charlotte said.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Sumeragi. I am the head of the Duke Cretia house, Cedric. By your leave, please allow me to introduce everyone to you. From the Beltrum Kingdom, this is the hero, Sir Sakata, the second Princess Flora, and Duke Fontaine’s daughter Lady Roanna. Everyone else aside from Haruto are my family members. This is my wife Julianne, my son George, and his fiancee Colette. I believe you are acquainted with Liselotte from the other day?” Cedric said succinctly.

“Pleased to meet you. It’s an honor to be meeting the three of you, who have come all the way from Beltrum Kingdom, as well as the nobles that represent Galarc Kingdom,” Satsuki said respectfully.

“There’s no need to stay on our feet for any longer. Please, let us have a seat,” Cedric urged.

At the same time, the members of the Cretia family immediately decided on the seating based on social status and affiliation in their heads. They shuffled from the places they had been sitting at moments ago, encouraging Satsuki and Hiroaki and the others into their spots. In the end, everyone had their seats and faced one another.

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Satsuki sat down and faced Hiroaki, immediately talking to him with a friendly voice. “I had heard there were heroes summoned to every area just like me, but I’m happy to be able to actually meet one in person, Mr. Sakata Hiroaki. I doubt there’s even a need to confirm this, but you’re from Japan too, correct?”

“Well, yeah. It’s strange to meet another Japanese person in a fantasy world, but the main hero summoned to the Beltrum Kingdom also had a Japanese name, so there must have been some kind of rule behind it. Though I’m a little surprised to see a Japanese person other than a hero in this world,” Hiroaki said, looking at Miharu.

“Miharu was dragged into the summoning along with me and another person, our friend, who probably ended up as a hero as well,” Satsuki explained.

“Huh, dragged into a summoning. Well, that’s the typical way things go. But if you’re not a hero, then you don’t have a divine arms, right?” Hiroaki seemed to have an interest in Miharu’s circumstances, as he questioned her out of his own curiosity.

“Yes. I couldn’t understand the language of this world when I first arrived.” Miharu nodded.

“Oh, damn. Seriously? Being summoned to another world without any cheat-like benefits sounds more like a punishment… What a tragedy,” Hiroaki said heartily. Satsuki pouted a little unhappily to hear Hiroaki’s insensitive remarks to a girl he was meeting for the first time.

“No, thankfully Haruto took me into his care.” Miharu shook her head with a frown.

“Huh? Haruto, you say?” Hiroaki narrowed his eyes in suspicion and looked at Rio.

“Miharu was summoned to a location completely separate from me and our other friend. She was thrown into a grass field in this world and was wandering, lost, when Haruto

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saved her, or something.” Satsuki had lost a lot of her original friendliness, explaining things with a rather prickly tone.

Hiroaki accepted the explanation, then stared at Rio’s face once more. “Hmm, so that’s why you asked to accompany Liselotte to the banquet… But you said your parents were immigrants, right? Were they actually from Earth? Face aside, your name sounds a little Japanese. Hmm… Wait, hold on. You couldn’t possibly… be a hero, right? Is that enchanted sword a divine arms?” He seemed to have misunderstood the reason as to why Rio had taken care of Miharu.

“You jest. As I informed you when we first met, my parents are immigrants and I am a human born and raised in this world. I have friends I have known for a long time, too. The enchanted sword is not a divine arms.” Rio shook his head as though to dismiss the ridiculous thought.

“Ah, right. It was just a thought. I thought it was a pretty fantastic deduction, but now that you mention it, you knew one of Liselotte’s attendant girls already. Still, that was a lucky break. If you hadn’t been the first one to find her, wouldn’t her life pretty much be over?” Hiroaki said jokingly.

“Please stop being so insensitive. Slave merchants actually tried to abduct Miharu because she didn’t know the language,” Satsuki said to Hiroaki harshly.

“Hey, hey, are you serious? Well, not knowing the language would certainly be a disadvantage, but…” Hiroaki’s eyes widened as he stared closely at Miharu. He didn’t say it out loud, but his gaze was clearly stating: “Looks like that would definitely sell high.”

“But?” Satsuki asked cheerfully.

“Ah… Nope, it’s nothing. By the way, how old are you guys?” Even Hiroaki realized that would be a bad comment to make and changed the topic.

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“I just turned sixteen years old.”

“…I’m seventeen this year.” Miharu and Satsuki told him their ages.

“Heh, so you’re former high schoolers.” Hiroaki grinned.

“And how old would you be?” Satsuki asked.

“…Nineteen.” Hiroaki offered his age after a delicate pause.

“So a former university student?”

“Ah, you shouldn’t ask anyone who’s nineteen if they’re in a university or not — it’s generally considered tactless. There might be people who failed their exams out there.”

“Oh, so you failed your entrance exams. Sorry about that.”

Just who was the one lacking tact here? Satsuki thought as she ducked her head with a friendly smile.

“Tch, must be nice to be a student that doesn’t have to do their exams anymore. Just so you know, I’m only in this situation because I wouldn’t take anything less than my first choice school. I did get a B-grade. I simply passed up on my backup school. The high school I went to is a famous one too.” Hiroaki clicked his tongue.

“I don’t think there’s anything to be ashamed of, though. It isn’t rare for a prep school to have people take their exams multiple times.” Satsuki said incredulously.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” Hiroaki said, growing even more displeased. A tense air descended upon the room.

Satsuki had nothing more to say to Hiroaki, instead looking at Rio to question him curiously. “That aside, what do you think of our dresses, Haruto?”

“I think they suit the two of you very well,” Rio replied to the sudden spotlight with a faint smile.

“I see — thank you.” Satsuki laughed pleasantly. Miharu looked bashful. Hiroaki watched the two of them and snorted.

“Well, in that case, what do you think of my dress, Sir Haruto? There are so many beautiful people here, I’ve lost

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my confidence a little," Charlotte asked, also seeking Rio's opinion.

Rio sat up straight with a troubled expression. "I think it suits you extremely well," he replied simply.

Charlotte grinned widely. "Why, thank you very much. In that case, I'd like you to attend one of the three days of the banquet with me as my partner," she asked suddenly.

"No, while that would definitely be an honor…" Rio trailed off, struggling for words. It was disrespectful to decline, but he didn't think it was something that he could accept lightly, either.

"Oh? In that case, I would like to have Haruto as a partner for one day too," Satsuki said, jokingly stepping forth as another candidate.

"Then, Lady Miharu and Liselotte can have Sir Haruto for today, while the second and third day will be monopolized by Satsuki and I with one day each," Charlotte summarized, completely on board with the idea.

Rio was at a complete loss as he attempted to interrupt. "I believe the two of you may be getting a little hasty there…"

"Haha. You're in great demand, Haruto." Cedric laughed heartily.

"Meh!" Hiroaki grumbled in disgust.

"…" Flora looked somewhat envious, frowning as she watched their exchange. Seated opposite her, Miharu noticed.

…*Is the princess watching Haruto?* She wondered, before Flora's eyes suddenly turned to the front. When she made eye contact with Miharu, she gave a slightly uncomfortable bow as she realized she had been caught looking at Rio.

Miharu watched Flora questioningly as she returned the bow.

"…It was mentioned that Lady Miharu is under Sir Haruto's protection, but you weren't present at Amande, if I recall correctly?" Flora questioned Miharu nervously as she

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watched Rio.

"Yes. I was living elsewhere with Haruto's friends," Miharu replied honestly.

"Ah. Come to think of it, you had some fairly pretty followers with you in Amande. Are those two not here today?" Hiroaki had clear memories of Aishia and Celia accompanying Rio at the time.

"Yes. They've swapped places with Miharu and are visiting my friends instead," said Rio.

"I see. While it's against my principles to show interest in another man's women, I would have liked to see those two in gowns," Hiroaki said a bit shyly.

"Oh? Are those of us here not enough for you, great hero?" Liselotte laughed mischievously.

Hiroaki looked back at Liselotte, who was seated a fair distance from him. "Ah, no, that's not what I meant. If, say, Liselotte was sitting before me as a conversation partner, then I probably wouldn't show any interest in any other woman," he said smugly. In other words, he wanted to be the center of attention.

These two Japanese chicks — especially that stuck-up Satsuki one — don't seem like they'll be as considerate as Liselotte can be. While Flora has the looks, the way she speaks is... Well, I don't mind her beside me, but the order we're in just doesn't cut it.

At present, Satsuki was seated opposite Hiroaki in the seat of honor, and beside her was Miharu. Meanwhile, the quiet Flora was seated beside Hiroaki. Because of that, Hiroaki wasn't the center of attention like he usually was, which he found quite dull.

Honestly, what a rude man. He's basically saying that it's a drag having me seated before him. Well, I feel the same way about having you before me. I'd much prefer Haruto there. Satsuki saw through Hiroaki's true intentions and raged on the inside while maintaining her smile.

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“You have two such pretty and adorable girls with you already, how greedy of you to make a pass at Liselotte as well,” Satsuki said to Hiroaki with sarcastic exasperation.

“Oh? This is a polygamous world, you know. I’d appreciate it if you keep irrelevant comments to yourself.”

“You mean you have no intention of choosing one person?”

“I don’t want to rank the women who adore me. I have no intention of rejecting anyone, y’know?” Hiroaki replied with a huff and a sneer.

“…Is that so.” Satsuki couldn’t find anything else to say through her exasperation and ended the conversation there. She couldn’t imagine Liselotte adored Hiroaki by any means, but she chose not to voice that out loud.

Just then, someone knocked on the door, and a guard entered the room. “Excuse me. It is almost time for everyone to enter the venue.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The first floor of the social hall used as the venue for the banquet — the largest hall in the Galarc Kingdom — was crowded with royalty and nobility.

The venue was decorated extravagantly from floor to ceiling in a show of the king’s power. The chandeliers lit by the sorcery in them alone were enough to qualify the hall itself as a palace.

The hall could accommodate a maximum of 5,000 people in a stand-up buffet arrangement, but for a banquet to be held comfortably, roughly half that number was best. Tonight, about 1,500 elites had gathered at the venue, so there was plenty of room to use the hall comfortably.

The first day of the banquet was limited to the royalty and nobility affiliated with the Galarc Kingdom and Beltrum Kingdom’s Huguenot faction, so that number would increase

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by several hundred by the second day on.

"So, it's finally time to unveil the hero of our kingdom."

"The rumors say she's a young girl, only seventeen years of age."

"I've heard that she's extremely beautiful."

"Oh, I look forward to it. Perhaps a younger person would be more desperate to be married, too."

The extravagantly-dressed guests held such conversations all over the venue. While a normal party would be filled with small talk, shameless bragging, and probing into each others' lives, tonight, every noble was completely immersed in sharing rumors about Satsuki.

That being said, since Satsuki had closed off contact with practically everyone except the Galarc royalty since she was summoned to the castle and had been given strict orders to stay silent, it was understandable that the nobles wanted to gossip about her and were looking forward to her arrival. As the guest of honor, Satsuki was to enter the venue with the king after all the attendees had arrived. As most of the invited guests were already within the venue, her appearance was due soon.

Incidentally, it was normal at these types of parties for those with the highest rank or influence to arrive the latest, so the only ones missing besides Satsuki and the king were the leading royals and nobles from the Galarc Kingdom and Duke Huguenot's faction.

Those already within the venue were all the elites selected from each power faction, but those about to enter were even more elite than them. Among them were the Duke Cretia family members, including Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte, as well as Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna.

"It looks like Duke Gregory's people are here. Which means Duke Cretia's family should be next, followed by Her Highness, Princess Flora, and the hero affiliated with the Huguenot faction," a noble of the Galarc Kingdom said,

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chatting with a noble from Duke Huguenot's faction as Duke Gregory, a middle-aged man with good physique, entered the venue.

"Oh, speaking of Duke Cretia, I have heard that his daughter, Lady Liselotte, has made quite a few spectacular achievements. Something about how Amande was under attack by monsters just the other day..." the noble from Duke Huguenot's faction replied.

"Apparently, Amande was restored splendidly in no time at all. That woman is the living embodiment of intelligence and beauty. She still has no fiancé, so you could say Duke Cretia would be the ideal person to become close to..."

"She would certainly be out of reach of the average youngster. I constantly hear rumors of marriage proposals, but I wonder who will be the one to eventually win her heart." With her influence both internally and externally to the kingdom, her marriage partner was a topic that was almost always gossiped about.

"The Duke Cretia family has arrived!" The voice of the noble in charge of announcements at the venue echoed throughout the hall. Those in the hall immediately fell silent at the name of the most prosperous noble family in the Galarc Kingdom, currently surpassing Duke Gregory's family by a fair amount.

"Hmph." The already-present Duke Gregory snorted in displeasure. The arrival of the Cretia family after the Gregory family meant that King Francois held the Cretia family in higher esteem. As the head of his family, it was certainly unpleasant for Gregory to see.

The door on the upper floor of the hall opened, revealing Duke Cretia and his family members. Leading the way was the head of the family, Cedric, and his wife Julianne.

The nobles in the venue had continued chatting with each other during his appearance, but now, everyone's attention was naturally focused on the Cretia family.

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“So the head of the family, Sir Cedric, and his wife, Lady Julianna have arrived first. I’m so envious of their beauty as a couple.”

“I’ve heard they get along extremely well as a couple too. Well, with a lady as wonderful as Lady Julianne, it’s no wonder they can remain so devoted regardless of age.”

The nobles conversed lightly until Liselotte’s older brother George and his fiancée Colette appeared after.

“Looks like the next head of the Cretia family has arrived. And the second son Sir Pascal seems absent after all.”

“Sir Pascal is currently occupied with the command of our army by the Proxia Empire border. The recent state of tension must have made him prioritize his duties more.”

“Hmm, then his absence could not be helped. However… I don’t see Lady Liselotte following behind them. Could she be absent too?” Pascal aside, when the members of the Cretia family cut off after George and Colette’s arrival to the venue, the nobles present started murmuring to each other in surprise.

George, meanwhile, sensed the confused air in the venue and grinned cheerfully. “Oh my, as expected of my little sister’s reputation. Causing a fuss simply with her absence alone. However, I’m sure there’ll be an even greater fuss when she appears after this.”

“I look forward to the response,” Colette agreed with a giggle.

At any rate, with the Cretia family’s arrival, all the nobles of the Galarc Kingdom attending tonight should have been accounted for. The next guests to enter would be Hiroaki and the other members of Duke Huguenot’s faction, or so everyone expected. However —

“Next, may I announce the arrival of Lady Satsuki Sumeragi’s close friend, Lady Miharu Ayase, her savior Sir Haruto, and finally, Lady Liselotte Cretia!”

“What?!” Hearing the announcement of the appearance of

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Satsuki's close friend, her savior, and even Liselotte had the whole hall in turmoil.

The door at the upper floor of the hall opened once more, revealing one man and two women. They were, of course, Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte. Rio had a dressed-up Miharu and Liselotte on each side of him, which earned him the attention of the entire venue.

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“How… young…”

“There’s no mistaking that one of them is the young Lady Liselotte, but I wonder which is Lady Satsuki’s friend and which is the savior between the gray-haired boy and black-haired girl?”

“While it isn’t too unusual to bring two women as partners to these events, who would have thought one of the women would be Lady Liselotte… Just what kind of relationship is that?”

“That is also a point of interest… My my, Lady Liselotte aside, the other boy and girl are another remarkable couple and easy on the eyes.”

Liselotte was already deemed to be the most unattainable woman in the Galarc Kingdom, having a reputation as an iron wall of a beauty who had never had any love affairs rumored of her, so for her to appear along with Satsuki’s friend was naturally a huge shock to the nobles.

“…Does anyone know who that boy and girl are?” The nobles asked each other, searching for someone who knew of Rio or Miharu.

“No, I don’t know them.”

“Same here.”

No one knew of the two of them. There was no way anyone would know Miharu, who had been living in the spirit folk village until recently, and Rio’s notable activities started and ended at Amande.

Normally, nobles that entered the hall through the upper floor would proceed to move towards the lower floor, but Rio and the others remained on the upper floor.

“If they’re not coming downstairs, then there might be an explanation of the circumstances later.”

“It makes me even more impatient to see Lady Satsuki.”

The nobles waited in anticipation for what would happen next. They were beginning to gather around Duke Cretia’s family to hear what they had to say, being aware of the

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situation.

However, the announcement for the next guest arrival began instead.

“The hero, Sir Hiroaki Sakata, Second Princess of Beltrum Kingdom, Princess Flora, eldest daughter of Duke Fontaine, Lady Roanna, and Duke Gustav of the Huguenot family have arrived!” The noble acting as the presenter announced loudly as Hiroaki’s group appeared from the door on the upper floor. In contrast to Hiroaki boldly taking the lead with Flora and Roanna on each side of him as his partners, Duke Huguenot brought up the rear as a supporting role.

For the Huguenot faction, the banquet was the perfect stage to make a public relations show of Hiroaki as the hero belonging to them. Because Hiroaki’s existence wasn’t a secret like Satsuki’s, he had been used widely and proactively in propaganda, but this was the first time he was making an appearance at such a large gathering.

“Her Highness Princess Flora is as beautiful as ever.”

“As expected of Beltrum Kingdom’s top beauty.”

“Lady Roanna is also quite intimidating.”

The nobles naturally focused their attention on Flora and Roanna accompanying Hiroaki as his partners. The two of them followed one step behind Hiroaki as he headed straight for Rio and the others. Flora approached Rio and quietly watched his side profile.

“The hero, Lady Satsuki Sumeragi, His Majesty, and the royal family have arrived!” The hall fell silent in an instant, everyone facing downwards as they waited for their appearance with humble expressions.

Immediately, the door to the upper floor opened slowly, echoing through the silent hall.

“Everyone may raise their heads!” Francois’ words were passed on by the presenting noble. At that, the nobles released their suppressed curiosity and looked up at the floor above them.

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There stood Francois alongside Satsuki, surrounded by the members of the royal family. Among them were the First Prince Michel and Second Princess Charlotte.

“Ooh…!” The nobles all raised their voices to cheer at the sight of the Galarc royal family symbolizing their authority. Satsuki’s back was ramrod straight as she asserted her presence, comparable to King Francois’.

Francois raised his right hand. “Thank you for gathering today, everyone. This is a moment to celebrate,” he said from his elevated position on the upper floor. His voice was low and calm, but elegant, and it carried well in the grand space.

“Everyone has gathered here from inside and outside of the kingdom for one reason. As you all know, there is someone I would like to introduce you all to,” Francois said, looking at Satsuki as she stood beside him.

“Allow me to introduce you to the hero that was summoned to the Galarc Kingdom, Lady Satsuki Sumeragi.” Satsuki smiled faintly and grabbed the hem of her dress.

“Oooh!” Cheers echoed throughout the hall.

“Beautiful!”

“What dignity!”

“Truly a goddess among women! As expected of a hero!”

Voices praising Satsuki could be heard from every corner of the hall. The male nobles were particularly excited at how much sweeter her appearance was than they’d expected. There were even some throwing exaggerated comments around.

“Hmm.” Seeing the venue react to Satsuki’s figure with songs of praise made Hiroaki frown slightly in displeasure. Beside him, Roanna noticed Hiroaki’s slight change in demeanor.

“Sir Hiroaki, is something the matter?” she whispered in his ear.

“Nothing, I just thought they’re being a bit over the top.

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The hall is more interested in Satsuki than they were with me," Hiroaki said, looking down at the hall below him.

"What are you saying? The spotlight is just temporarily shifted to her because this is her first public appearance, and everyone is curious. Everyone here is just as expectant and attentive to you as well, Sir Hiroaki," Roanna said with a smile.

"Ah, well, if you say so, then perhaps... I personally don't want to be in the spotlight, though..." Hiroaki said with an exasperated and bitter smile. However, contrary to his words, his expression said that he was more than willing to play the part of a hero.

"Well, weren't you talking so passionately about how you would save us before? There'll be no going back once we formally declare your position at this banquet," Roanna said with a cheeky smile and uneasiness nonetheless.

"Hey hey, don't make that face. I promised you, didn't I? That I would be the one to protect you and Flora. Well, a man doesn't go back on his words," he said with a small, awkward shrug. His desire to protect others seemed to be stimulated.

"In that case, I will continue to serve at your side with what little power I have," Roanna declared resolutely.

Ah, at first I wanted to become a carefree adventurer and form my own harem, but now it seems like I have no other choice than to be a hero. The noble class girls are cute, and above all, devoted. There's no guarantee I'd meet women as fine as this if I became an adventurer, too. I guess the hero route ain't that bad, then. Hiroaki directed a smile at Roanna with a huff before looking back on how his own change of heart and letting out a heavy sigh.

"Silence! You are before His Majesty!" The noble presenter's voice echoed loudly, seeing the commotion in the hall. The tumult came to a stop, cutting off Hiroaki and Roanna's conversation too.

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“It is fine. Everyone’s cheers are most understandable,” Francois stated in a cheerful mood. “It has indeed been over a thousand years since the Strahl region was last graced with heroes. Perhaps this is a sign of prosperity from the Six Wise Gods. At any rate, there is good news to be shared tonight. Many of you may be aware, but there is another hero in our presence. The hero, Sir Sakata Hiroaki, Princess Flora Beltrum, and Duke Huguenot. Step this way,” Francois said, and Roanna remained where she was.

Hiroaki nodded a bit nervously before walking forward. Things were progressing as they had discussed in advance, but he had never been in the spotlight before so many people while he was living on Earth. It was no surprise that he was a bundle of nerves.

“Beltrum Kingdom’s Second Princess, Princess Flora, and the well-renowned Duke Huguenot have an important announcement to make. Everyone, listen carefully,” Francois said, stepping back. Duke Huguenot assumed his place and looked down at the nobles in the hall. He gave a reverent bow.

“As introduced just now, I am Gustav Huguenot. As His Majesty King Francois stated, we wish to borrow this space today to make an extremely important announcement to the people of the Galarc Kingdom. As you all know, the Kingdom of Beltrum was divided internally into two factions of nobility after the occupancy by the Proxia Empire at one of our military bases. One of them is the faction led by Duke Arbor, currently using the royal capital as their base, and has real power over all things by using His Majesty King Philip as a puppet,” he began, speaking openly and eloquently.

The nobles in attendance silently lended their ears towards Duke Huguenot’s words.

“Inexperienced as I am, the faction I lead is formed of those who were unfortunately driven out by Duke Arbor’s purification activities, barely escaping to Rodania alive.

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Outwardly, the reason for Duke Arbor's purification activities was the denouncement of one of the military bases being occupied by the Proxia Empire. However, we possess evidence that Duke Arbor has been colluding with the Proxia Empire for some time."

The hall stirred a little. It was an unspoken agreement shared within the Huguenot faction, but this was the first time they were declaring their stance in a public setting.

"Unfortunately, it isn't conclusive proof, but in regards to the occupation — no, cession of territory to the Proxia Empire, we suspect with near certainty that Duke Arbor exchanged some form of secret agreement. In reality, the faction that formerly asserted a hard line towards the Proxia Empire has, whether they hold true power or not, completely changed their attitude towards them and formed an alliance. At the same time, they have completely distanced themselves from the Galarc Kingdom," Duke Huguenot said, skillfully mixing conjecture with facts into his speech to present a convincing argument.

"..." No one in the hall showed any particular negative attitude to Duke Huguenot's speech, the plausibility hanging in the air.

"However, the current distance between the Beltrum Kingdom's current administration and the Galarc Kingdom is not the desire of our beloved King Philip. As I mentioned before, His Majesty has been made a puppet of the treacherous Arbors. Anyone who makes light of the royal authority bestowed by the Six Wise Gods should not be overlooked. Her Highness, Princess Flora, is also aware of the situation His Majesty has been placed in and greatly laments the current state of things," Duke Huguenot said with a regretful expression, stressing his point with a look at Flora standing beside him. The audience in the hall gulped and listened intently regardless of their own nationality.

"Thus, I have taken Her Highness under my own

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protection. On top of that, a base has been established in Rodania to recruit like-minded individuals who cannot accept Arbor's misgovernment. Our goal is to hand over the power of the kingdom to the rightful ruler with the royal bloodline and restore Beltrum to its former glory. In other words, we have stood up for the great cause of restoring the Beltrum Kingdom to its rightful monarchy. Princess Flora is a symbol of that. That is why I am declaring, here and now: with Her Highness Princess Flora as the representative, we are forming the Beltrum Kingdom Special Administration, named Restoration." Duke Huguenot grandly declared the formation of a new organization, looking at Flora and the Galarc Kingdom King Francois behind him.

Francois stood in line with Flora and Duke Huguenot and officially approved of the formation of Restoration as witness. "I hereby declare that the Galarc Kingdom recognizes the formal establishment of the Beltrum Special Administration, Restoration."

"Ooh...!" The nobles in the hall made a great stir. Until now, Duke Huguenot's faction had been in an unofficial position, but there was great meaning in forming an official organization and having a large kingdom's recognition.

"Furthermore, Sir Hiroaki Sakata, the hero summoned by the divine stone, has also acknowledged the formation of Restoration and given his firm promise to assist us in our activities," Duke Huguenot added, motioning towards Hiroaki. Hiroaki raised his right hand with a smirk, and the venue broke into cheers.

"As stated before, the representative of the organization will be Her Highness Princess Flora, but Sir Hiroaki will also be formally affiliated with Restoration. By their leave, I will be acting as an advisor to the two." At this moment, Duke Huguenot's face was that of a man that had regained his glory, as he spoke with true eloquence. Hiroaki was also riding the high. Having heard the cheers echoing throughout

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the hall, his mouth was turned into a truly pleased smile.

...So this situation is exactly what Duke Huguenot planned, huh... The hero from the Beltrum government will arrive tomorrow. Looks like I'll have more things to report to the Professor, Rio thought, looking on at Duke Huguenot and Hiroaki's confident smiles.

If the hero, Sakata Hiroaki, hadn't descended upon them, the Huguenot faction would never have managed to form the Restoration so smoothly. Even with the backing of the Second Princess and the possession of the divine stone, it was doubtful that that would have been enough to put them back into the spotlight once more.

However, whether it was by coincidence or inevitability, Sakata Hiroaki appeared before the Huguenot faction.

The general public was a mass of simple creatures. Even though they had the same role in personifying the authority of the Six Wise Gods, a disciple as the personification was thankfully easier to understand than a divine item like the sacred stone.

As a result, Duke Huguenot obtained two hands in the form of the Second Princess and the hero, gained the backing of the large Galarc Kingdom, and managed to form the Restoration successfully.

For the current Beltrum Kingdom, where the power of the crown had weakened, the aim of regaining the glory of the past sounded like nonsense, but a just cause was required.

Though he had been handed a blessing, Duke Huguenot's overall capabilities were truly magnificent. The current situation was proof of that.

Fortune is finally in my favor. Haruto... While it is unfortunate that he's forming a closer relationship with the Galarc Kingdom, I suppose that cannot be helped. Duke Huguenot glanced at Rio, smiling at the cheers of the venue.

Francois raised his right hand high to silence the venue. "Furthermore, with the establishment of the Restoration,

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our Galarc hero Lady Satsuki Sumeragi will be officially forming an alliance with the Restoration along with Sir Hiroaki Sakata. I hereby recognize this as fact.

"Our future, as we walk alongside these two heroes, disciples of the Six Wise Gods, will surely be bright. That is why I ask the two heroes: will you follow us along our path?" He asked Satsuki and Hiroaki in an exaggerated manner.

"Yes. As long as you walk the righteous path, I, Satsuki Sumeragi, promise to assist your kingdom with my humble power," Satsuki answered smoothly with the script prepared in advance. Because she had plenty of experience standing in front of others as a member of the student council in high school, she was used to the gazes of the people before her and didn't seem nervous. Applause rang through the hall.

Then, the gazes of the audience gathered on Hiroaki next.

Ah, if they're asking for a favor they should really watch their wording. Kings are so full of themselves — I can't stand it, Hiroaki thought to himself. Perhaps because of the position as king, Francois' pompous speech touched upon his nerves. Hiroaki hated being looked down on. However —

"Ah, sure. I vow to assist you as long as your actions are righteous," Hiroaki nodded calmly and said.

Well, it'd be more generous of me to respond calmly here, he thought to himself. Applause welcoming Hiroaki's vow resounded loudly.

"That is all. Now, you may all enjoy tonight's banquet as you please. Or so I would like to say, but first, I have a few people to introduce. As was said before, this is Lady Miharu, a friend of Lady Satsuki, and her savior Haruto. The two of you, come forth," Francois said, calling Rio and Miharu over.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Rio bowed his head respectfully. Meanwhile, Miharu replied with stiff fear.

"Y-Yes."

"This elegant girl is Lady Miharu Ayase. Though she was summoned here from the same world as Lady Satsuki, she

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found herself in a deserted grassland instead of the royal castle. The one who protected Lady Miharu and brought her to the castle was this young man — Haruto. You may have heard of how Amande was under the attack of monsters just recently. There were harmful creatures such as demi-dragons among them, but Haruto drove them away with his enchanted sword. It was on that occasion that he rescued Princess Flora and formed a friendship with Liselotte. Though he is a wandering swordsman traveling through the lands, he is another hero in his own right. Do make sure that you do not underestimate him for being a commoner and show impoliteness," Francois said, praising Rio greatly while strongly warning the nobles away from acting rude. The nobles who listened to the king's direct statement of his heroism stirred noisily.

Liselotte smiled proudly as the audience looked to her. Most of the nobility at the venue quietly decided to treat Rio as their superior that night, beating the name Haruto into their heads.

"That is all. This time, you may all enjoy the banquet for real," Francois said, finally signaling the official start of the banquet.

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Afterward, Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte joined up with Satsuki, Francois, and the other royals to receive the surge of nobility that came climbing up the stairs from the hall. Although the conversations were short and only involved a simple greeting exchange, there were a great number of people to get through, unfortunately.

Rio formed a group with Miharu, Liselotte, and Charlotte separate from Francois or Satsuki beside them, but many people came to greet Satsuki — who was, of course, the guest of honor — as well as her friend Miharu. Rio, who'd been

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directly introduced by Francois as a hero, was also a point of interest.

The guests included great lords such as Duke Gregory and Duke Valier, father of George's fiancee Colette, and while conversation with royalty and nobility was tiring for the inexperienced, Liselotte and Charlotte skillfully offered their banquet experience and support to lessen the burden on the others.

Nevertheless, greeting the guests took one to three minutes each, so although the thousands of nobility hadn't come one by one, they had to repeat the same greetings at least a hundred times. Thus, even with short breaks in between, the time added up until Rio and the others had conversed with the nobility for nearly four hours. As a result, by the time they were done greeting most of the nobility, it was nearly time for the banquet to wrap up.

"Would anyone like a refreshment?" A waitress carried around drinks within gold goblets which Miharu and Rio, who was also fatigued for once, accepted.

"...Yes, I'll take one." Gulping down the well-iced cocktail, their throats were quenched in an instant. At the same time, a huge wave of fatigue came upon them.

Charlotte gulped down her drink before expressing her appreciation towards Rio and Miharu with a smile. "Thank you for your hard work today, Sir Haruto. Lady Miharu."

"Yes, even I feel a little tired," said Rio.

"We'll be ending tonight's event soon, but I think you should have an idea as to why the banquet takes place over three days. The first day always ends after greeting everyone you don't normally see, so we limit the attendees to those within our circles and prepare for outside guests on the second and third day. You two must have been especially busy, as the banquet ends with just the greetings for us royalty and guests of honor. I'm sorry for that," Charlotte explained, holding a hand against her cheek as she

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apologized to Rio and Miharu. Seeing how the members of the Restoration were permitted to attend the first day, it showed just how much special treatment they were receiving.

“Not at all. We’re the ones causing trouble with our abrupt attendance, so please make use of us whenever you need to,” Rio said willingly.

“Yes, I’ll do my best as well!” Miharu agreed.

“However, position-wise, the first day is probably the toughest day for you two. You’ve already finished greeting the nobility from the Galarc Kingdom and Restoration tonight, and there’ll be other heroes in attendance from the second day onwards, which will scatter everyone’s attention. You should have a little bit of time to move around freely tomorrow,” Liselotte added.

“Yes, it’s our job as royalty to greet important figures from the other kingdoms. Please relax and enjoy yourselves tomorrow. Would you like to join the dance? If there’s time to spare, I’d love to have Sir Haruto as my partner for a song,” Charlotte said, inviting Rio with a flirtatious look.

Normally, the unspoken rule was for the man to make the invitation for a dance, but it was also acceptable for the woman to do the asking, depending on their relationship. For such exceptional cases, it was considered a breach of manners for an unmarried man to decline a dance invitation from an unmarried woman.

All the more so for Rio, who despite being Miharu’s savior, was still merely a commoner. There was no way he could decline. Or rather, there would be disadvantages in declining the offer, whereas there wouldn’t be any in accepting.

“Yes, it would be my honor,” Rio agreed without hesitation.

“Oh, I’m happy to hear that. In that case, it’s a promise — please ask me out tomorrow, Sir Haruto,” Charlotte said,

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grasping Rio's arm as she drew closer to him.

"...Yes." Rio almost stiffened up by impulse, but nodded amiably. He suddenly looked around to gauge the reactions of their surroundings, and Miharu startled in unrest. Liselotte sighed quietly so that Rio wouldn't hear.

"Well then, I shall head over to Father's side for a while. It looks like Lady Satsuki is heading this way now, so please continue your conversation." Charlotte glanced at Miharu and smiled, bowing gracefully before looking in the direction of King Francois. Satsuki had just finished her wave of greetings and was left free to make her way towards them.

Charlotte grasped the hem of her dress and elegantly bowed to Rio and the others before calling out to Satsuki, who was about to replace her spot. "Thank you for your hard work, Lady Satsuki. I'm going to head over to Father, so please enjoy what little time is left in Sir Haruto's company."

"Yup, thank you. Good work today, Char." After Satsuki smiled and nodded, Charlotte headed over to Francois. "Great job today, you three. Thank you for staying right beside these two for the whole time, Liselotte. I felt reassured," Satsuki said to Rio, Miharu, and Liselotte.

"Not at all. Her Highness Princess Charlotte was present as well, and these two were answering all inquiries very smoothly without my assistance." Liselotte shook her head with a smile.

"That's not true. It was a big help to have you there," Miharu said, and Rio agreed.

"What they said. And besides, I wanted to thank you for bringing Miharu to the banquet in the first place, Liselotte," Satsuki said.

"I brought Lady Miharu to the banquet because I owed Sir Haruto a debt. If anything, bringing Lady Satsuki's friend here has ultimately benefited me as well, so I should be the grateful one. I've been able to form a new bond with Sir Haruto as well," Liselotte smirked devilishly and glanced at

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Rio. The four people present could tell what kind of relationship she meant without any further detail.

"I've heard that you have memories of your previous life, including the story behind the Ricca Guild. Of course, I don't know the specific details of your past life…" Satsuki said as she carefully watched Rio and Liselotte's reactions. She could only imagine herself what it was like to have memories of a past life, but she figured the topic of a dead person's memories was rather delicate and found it hard to ask about it directly.

That being said, it was the perfect topic to dig into how close the relationship was between Rio and Liselotte, and depending on what was discussed, it could give her a clearer view of Liselotte as a person. With the four of them gathered together, it was the optimal timing to bring up the topic, even in a roundabout way.

"Actually, while part of the reason is due to how I've been too busy to make the time, we haven't really sat down and discussed our past lives with each other in detail," Liselotte said with a wry smile, glancing at Rio.

"It could also be because of the difficult topic," Rio added with a slightly guilty look. As a matter of fact, the reason why Liselotte hadn't discussed her past life in great detail was due to Rio hinting at his connection to Miharu in his previous life — he'd requested that he be the one to tell Miharu and the others the truth about how Miharu was from a world four years before Haruto and Rikka died.

Until Rio told Miharu the truth, she wouldn't say anything. She drew a line there out of consideration for Rio, which he was somewhat aware of.

"Yes. However, I've wanted to talk to you too. If it's okay with Sir Haruto, I would like to discuss this more in the future," Liselotte said.

"…After the third night of the banquet, sometime in the near future, I'd like to have some of your time to discuss it,"

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Rio declared to Liselotte eloquently.

“Is that really okay with you?” Liselotte widened her eyes a bit and looked at Rio.

“Yes. My goal was this banquet to begin with. I won’t put it off anymore,” Rio said, showing a fleeting smile. Incidentally, the goal he was referring to was his deadline to reveal the truth to Miharu and the others. However, Miharu and Satsuki had no idea what he was talking about, and tilted their heads in confusion.

“...I see. Well then, I’ll be looking forward to it. There’s a lot of things I want to talk about with you,” Liselotte rejoiced with a kind smile.

“It seems like these two are lost in their own world. Right, Miharu?” Satsuki narrowed her eyes at Rio and stepped closer to Miharu, who was similarly being left out of the conversation. Miharu looked panicked and stumbled over her words.

“Ah, no... Umm...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be sure to tell you as well, Satsuki.” Rio said with a bitter smile.

“Hmm, I don’t intend on prying into things forcefully...” Satsuki had an apologetic but conflicted look on her face.

“It’s something relevant to you too.”

“...Hmm. Well, all right then.” At Rio’s words, Satsuki’s eyes widened as she nodded. Meanwhile, Miharu was silently and idly watching Rio, when their gazes suddenly met.

“Of course, I’ll tell Miharu too. I’ve stayed silent about it until now, and I know it’s completely at my convenience to tell you now... But I’d appreciate it if you could listen,” Rio explained awkwardly, frowning at Miharu.

“O-Okay...” Miharu gulped, nodding her head.

“...It feels like the air got a bit heavy. Okay! Let’s set this conversation aside for now. Oh yes, that’s right. Liselotte, there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you in person.”

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Satsuki clapped her hands together as she changed the subject, looking at Liselotte.

“Sure, what is it?” Liselotte cocked her head.

“Does the Ricca Guild handle rice and miso?” Satsuki asked, looking at Liselotte’s face expectantly.

“Ah, of course you would miss that,” Liselotte seemed to sense Satsuki’s emotions and laughed a bit sadly in empathy.

Satsuki assumed there was little hope from Liselotte’s reaction. “I guess you don’t have it, then…?” she asked helplessly.

“Technically speaking, we do have rice. However, we lack an appropriate method to cook the rice grains into white rice. I eat it as risotto, but I do miss the taste of white rice. Unfortunately, I don’t have the knowledge of how to produce miso, so it doesn’t exist at present,” Liselotte replied regretfully.

“I see. I asked around in the castle, but they said they didn’t know, so I didn’t have high hopes… Ah, I want to eat white rice and miso soup…”

“…Yes, I want to eat it too.”

Meanwhile, Rio and Miharu exchanged a slightly awkward glance with each other, unsure of how to react when they had been eating that on a daily basis. Rio realized it would be bad to stay silent and spoke up to the two of them. “…In that case, shall I prepare it for you?”

“…Huh?” Satsuki and Liselotte both widened their eyes, looking at Rio in unison.

“I have rice and miso, so I can share some with you. And with some pickled vegetables too, if you’d like,” Rio said with a strangely strained smile as he explained his previous statement in more detail.

“Y-You have them?!”

“And with pickled vegetables?!”

Satsuki and Liselotte reacted in unison once more, drawing close to Rio.

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“Well, yes, actually…” Rio nodded awkwardly.

“You! If you had them you should have said so earlier!”

“That’s right! Do you know how long I’ve spent searching for those?!”

Satsuki and Liselotte were completely synchronized in their pouting. Even the normally courteous and well-spoken Liselotte was showing her true self at the prospect of a white rice, miso soup, and pickled vegetables set.

“I-I understand. Then, sometime in the near future, if you could find the time to have a meal with just the four of us. I would be happy to prepare the food.” Rio was overwhelmed by their enthusiasm and made a firm promise, though he left all the minor details to them.

“A meal with the four of us… No, I got it. It’s for the sake of rice and miso soup and pickled vegetables. I’ll negotiate a way to hold a dinner party in my quarters.” Satsuki hummed in thought, refusing to back down.

“Please do, Lady Satsuki,” Liselotte said with a serious expression.

The first night of the banquet came to an end, and they all fell into a deep sleep, too tired to visit the stone house.

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Chapter 6: Banquet, Before Day 2. And in the Shadows...

It was decided that Rio and Miharu would continue to stay in Satsuki's quarters for the first night of the banquet. The next morning, they rose a little later than usual due to their fatigue from the previous night and enjoyed a relaxed breakfast. Once afternoon rolled around, they had a later lunch to accommodate for the late breakfast.

"Mm, I still feel tired from yesterday. It was my first time talking to so many people, so it was more exhausting than I thought it'd be. Are you two doing all right?" Satsuki asked Rio and Miharu as she stretched her arms in the air.

"I think I'll manage," Rio nodded cheerfully. There was no sign of fatigue on his face.

"Me too," Miharu said, but her face showed a bit of exhaustion.

"No pushing yourselves. The hero from the Centostella Kingdom could arrive at any moment, but we don't know if it's Takahisa or not, so we should just relax until we find out. Ah, speaking of relaxing, I want to go to Haruto's house!" Satsuki said teasingly.

"While it would be bad to sneak out regularly, if there's an opportunity for it, then you're most welcome to come." Rio chuckled. Miharu also laughed happily, clearly at ease at the moment despite her fatigue.

However, their moment of relaxation did not last long, as a knock echoed from the door to Satsuki's quarters.

"Yes, who is it? It's open." Satsuki remained seated at the dining table as she called out to the door. Immediately, the

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door opened with a clack to reveal a female knight acting as messenger.

“Pardon the intrusion. The Centostella Kingdom’s hero, Sir Takahisa Sendo, has arrived. In line with this, he has immediately requested an audience with the two of you, and is waiting in the drawing parlor. Can you come with me?” The female knight said.

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Roughly ten minutes later, Satsuki and Miharu brought Rio along as they rushed towards the drawing parlor. When the guard before the room opened the door, Satsuki entered the room in the lead, Miharu and Rio following behind her.

“Excuse me!”

Inside the room, Francois and Charlotte from the Galarc side were seated in the lower seats, while the seat of honor at the back was taken by a black-haired Japanese boy and a beautiful girl with long, sparkling blonde hair. Three female knights stood on standby behind the boy and girl. A young girl in her early teens was among them, and for some reason her eyes widened a bit when she spotted Rio and the others.

“Satsuki! And…!” The black-haired Japanese boy shot out of his seat as soon as Satsuki appeared. Then, when he spotted Miharu behind her, his expression was overcome with emotion.

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“You seem to be doing well, Takahisa.” Satsuki giggled at him.

“Y-Yeah! Ah, thank goodness. I’ve wanted to see you this whole time!” Takahisa nodded firmly before approaching Satsuki and the others, unable to stand still any longer.

“Ahaha, were you lonely?” Satsuki asked him teasingly.

“Of course I was. I thought I’d never be able to go home — never be able to see everyone again. I was so sad,” Takahisa said.

“Well, I know how that feels. I was the same until I met Miharu,” Satsuki said, turning back so that Takahisa could see Miharu behind her.

“Long time no see, Takahisa.” Miharu smiled gently. She hadn’t seen Takahisa in a long time.

“Ah, so you came to this world too, Miharu. I don’t know what to say… Umm, can I… can I look at your face from up close? I really wanted to see you. I wanted to see you all this time. When I thought I’d never see you again, I… I always regretted it…” Takahisa had a conflicted mix of happiness and regret on his face as he suddenly approached Miharu.

“Y-Yeah…” Miharu stiffened faintly when Takahisa came right up to her.

“I’m really so glad to see you again!” The swirling emotions within Takahisa’s chest must have exploded, as he suddenly hugged Miharu. Everyone’s eyes widened.

“Eh…?” Takahisa’s sudden action had Miharu completely taken aback too. Her entire body froze, but she subjected herself to being hugged for a few moments.

However, when she met Rio’s eyes beside her, she snapped back to her senses with a gasp. “A-Ah, s-stop it!” Miharu shoved Takahisa away reflexively and distanced herself from Takahisa. It was a reaction unimaginable of the normally-docile Miharu.

“Uh…” Takahisa blinked, slowly backing away one, then two steps. Then he looked down at his own arms,

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dumbfounded. Miharu's warmth still remained.

He hadn't hugged her as a means of harassment. He had just been so happy to reunite with Miharu, his elated emotions made him act before he realized it. However, he realized he'd done so without her permission and was shocked by his own actions.

"Ah, umm. I'm sorry." Miharu returned to her senses and apologized for shoving Takahisa, her gaze wandering to avoid his out of fear. At the end of her gaze, she made eye contact with Rio.

"..." There was a shadow over Rio, but he had a gentle expression that was worrying over Miharu's loss of composure. The expression was very similar to the Haruto in her dreams, making a chill run down Miharu's back.

Miharu suddenly had a flashback — in the dream Aishia showed her, Haruto had just entered high school and was watching Miharu and Takahisa talk intimately with a somewhat sad look on his face. "Y-You're wrong. It's not like that!" Miharu suddenly yelled to Rio in a panic, feeling as though her heart had frozen over. Everyone's eyes widened — Rio included. He was taken aback.

"W-What's wrong? Are you okay, Miharu?" Satsuki cheerfully grabbed the flustered Miharu by the shoulders and called out to her to calm her down, causing Miharu to return to her senses and blink.

"...Ah, y-yes! Umm, I'm sorry, I was just surprised!" Miharu rapidly cooled down and apologized awkwardly. When she looked at Rio's face, her heartbeat thundered in her chest. Her body was heavy, like lead.

"Really?" Satsuki asked, looking carefully at Miharu's face.

"Yes." Miharu nodded, her face slightly pale. The two maintained eye contact for a while.

"That was all Takahisa's fault just now," Satsuki stated bluntly, glaring at Takahisa.

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“Y-Yes!” Takahisa’s face stiffened with guilt, accepting that he messed up.

“I know how precious you consider Miharu to be and I know how happy you must have felt to see her again, but you shouldn’t hug a girl out of the blue. Miharu isn’t comfortable around boys to begin with, so you have to treat her more delicately,” Satsuki said, effectively scolding him.

“S-Sorry. I was overwhelmed by the moment, and just… out of happiness…” Takahisa’s face was completely pale as he struggled to explain himself.

“Well, I know how you feel, but…” Satsuki heaved a sigh in exasperation.

“Umm, Miharu! I’m sorry! Truly!” Takahisa gave up on the unnecessary explanation and bowed his head deeply.

“I-It’s okay. I’m sorry too. I shoved you really hard… Are you hurt?” Miharu said kindly, looking at the part of him she had shoved at.

“No, I’m fine! There wasn’t that much strength behind it. More importantly, I’m the one at fault, so I’m really sorry!” Takahisa shook his head furiously.

“It’s okay. I’m fine, too…” Miharu said awkwardly, giving a weak shake of her head before glancing at Rio. Rio noticed Miharu’s gaze, but kept his expression fixed on his face. One scarlet-haired girl observed that interaction with deep interest.

“You shouldn’t have your reunion standing up. Everyone, please take a seat. Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu can sit opposite Sir Takahisa, and Sir Haruto can sit beside me. Is that all right with you, Father?” Charlotte suggested in a bright voice to dispel the strange atmosphere in the room.

“Indeed.” Francois nodded solemnly. Rio and the others exchanged looks before moving to their assigned seats. Takahisa also returned to his seat beside the blonde girl in shame.

“Lady Miharu, allow me to apologize as well” The blonde

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girl said to Miharu.

“Umm, you are…?” Miharu asked. She had a gentle face and a well-educated feel to her; above all, her clothing implied a fairly high ranking figure, but she had yet to be introduced.

“Oh, do excuse me. I have yet to introduce myself. I am Lilianna Centostella. The First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom.” Lilianna introduced herself with a pure and innocent smile.

Once Miharu knew she was the First Princess, she returned the introduction in a panic. “Forgive me for my rudeness. I am Miharu Ayase.”

“Allow me to introduce myself too. I’m Satsuki Sumeragi.” Satsuki gave a small bow in greeting.

“Of course. I have heard all about you two, as well as Sir Takahisa’s siblings Lady Aki and Sir Masato from Sir Takahisa himself, so I am well aware. The reason we originally decided to attend the banquet in the Galarc Kingdom was due to the fact that we heard Lady Satsuki would be in attendance, but when we actually arrived at the castle and heard Lady Miharu was also present, Sir Takahisa was so terribly delighted. That is why he may behave impulsively and wildly at times, but if you could understand that is just out of his happiness to reunite with you, I would appreciate it,” Lilianna explained.

“About that… you two wouldn’t know where Aki and Masato are, right?” Takahisa gave a weak smile as he asked. There was no way they could keep Aki and Masato’s locations from their older brother, but they couldn’t say it with Francois and Lilianna around.

“…Yes, at present.” Satsuki nodded her head nonchalantly.

“I see…” Takahisa frowned in disappointment.

“We can talk about the two of them later, but first could you tell us about what you’ve been up to all this time?

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Miharu and I will tell you what we were up to as well.” Satsuki said to Takahisa, selecting a topic she didn’t mind being shared with the people present.

“Yes. I wanted to ask that too.” Takahisa pulled himself together and nodded with a serious expression.

Takahisa went first: after being summoned to the Centostella royal castle, his life was thrown into complete confusion. After being told there was no way of returning to Earth and seeing the people he cared about ever again, he fell into despair — to the point his physical condition deteriorated and left him on bedrest.

“It was a huge shock when I learned I couldn’t go back to Earth… Of course, they treat me very well at the castle, but for the first month I had no appetite at all and lost a lot of weight. When I reached my limit, I collapsed from anemia…” Takahisa said in self-mockery.

“Sir Takahisa has very deep affection for those close to him. That is why he was unable to bear the loss of the people he cares so deeply about, and collapsed.” Lilianna said in regards to Takahisa’s deteriorated condition.

“Lily was the one who nursed me the whole time. She was always encouraging me when I was being pessimistic, listening to me, supporting me… She believed there was a possibility you guys had also become heroes and went to the king for information from other kingdoms. It’s all thanks to her that we were able to come to this banquet despite being a closed kingdom,” Takahisa explained, emphasizing how Lilianna had been his most trusted confidant. It was implied from the way he spoke that Takahisa trusted her quite a bit.

“I see… You’ve had it tough, too, Takahisa. While my physical condition didn’t deteriorate, I wasn’t in the right state of mind to act as a hero for a long time. I holed myself up in my quarters of the castle and lived each day feeling pretty miserable.” Satsuki frowned, biting down on her lip.

“Well, anyone would,” Takahisa sympathized with a

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bittersweet smile.

“Yeah. I’ve only become more optimistic recently. And, just in time, I met Miharu again.” Satsuki smiled gently and looked at Miharu seated beside her.

“…Was Miharu separated from you?” Takahisa’s eyes widened slightly.

“Yeah. I was under Haruto’s protection and lived together with him,” Miharu said with a glance at Rio.

“…Haruto? Him?” Takahisa noticed Rio at the end of Miharu’s gaze and stared at his face closely to confirm whether he was the one being mentioned.

“Yes, Haruto is the one who saved me after I wandered into this world. That is, since I was transported to an isolated grassland, I was in a bit of a pinch…” Miharu chose her words carefully as she explained what happened to her, so that she wouldn’t worry Takahisa.

“W-What do you mean? What happened?” Takahisa was shaken as he sought further explanation.

“Calm down, Takahisa. Some shocking things may have happened along the way, but as a result, Miharu is here safe and sound. You should listen calmly and don’t panic.” Satsuki sighed tiredly.

“O-Okay…” Takahisa nodded reluctantly.

“Go on, tell him, Miharu,” Satsuki urged her.

“Immediately after I wandered into this world, I walked through a grass field in search of people. I encountered some bad people, but Haruto came at just the right time and saved me. I’ve been in Haruto’s care ever since, and that’s how I was brought to this castle…” Miharu summarized.

“B-Bad people…?” Takahisa asked with a gulp.

“Slave merchants. They tried to abduct Miharu while she was clueless,” Satsuki sighed, informing him on Miharu’s behalf.

“Slaves?!” Takahisa was completely flustered.

“I told you to keep calm…” Satsuki scolded. “Guess that

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was asking for too much. But it's fine, nothing happened to her and Haruto saved her right away, so relax. I'm sure it was a scary experience, but Miharu's overcome that now. She's a strong girl."

"...Are you okay?" Takahisa asked, fearfully trying to read Miharu's expression.

"Yup. The only thing scary was the very beginning, but I've had nothing but fun ever since. If anything, I'm *too* happy now," Miharu said with a soft look.

"I... see..." Takahisa saw Miharu's expression, and for some reason, he felt his heart tighten unbearably. It throbbed in an unpleasant way, welling up with negative emotions one after another.

Thank goodness Miharu wasn't made into a slave! That would be... absolutely terrible. It goes against human rights! My... my Miharu...! Takahisa felt strong anger bubbling in his heart. Treating people as objects, ignoring a person's will, treating them however you liked — such primitive and savage systems went directly against Takahisa's sense of justice.

If Miharu had ended up a slave, just what would she have gone through? Imagining that made Takahisa pale in horror.

"Uh..." Takahisa's heart throbbed even harder, making him clutch at his chest reflexively.

"Are you all right, Sir Takahisa?" Lilianna asked.

"Yeah, I just couldn't forgive that slave merchant — no, the whole slavery system... Ignoring a person's will and using them however one wishes should definitely be prohibited," Takahisa said, taking a deep breath before spitting out his anger.

"...Yes, it isn't a desirable thing." Lilianna showed a glimpse of a dark expression as she agreed with him.

"But I'm glad Miharu's safe. So glad you didn't end up a slave..." Takahisa stared at Miharu straight in the face, thinking that from the bottom of his heart.

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“…Thank you, Takahisa. But thanks to Haruto, I’m fine, so don’t think too much about it,” Miharu said with a conflicted expression.

“…Thank you very much, Haruto. For saving Miharu.” Takahisa had a somewhat odd smile as he thanked Rio. While his true feelings were grateful towards him, Takahisa also felt frustrated that it wasn’t himself that saved Miharu. Imagining Miharu growing close to Rio somewhere while he was unaware made him feel excluded and extremely anxious. He was scared there was a Miharu he didn’t know.

“No, I only did what should have been done.” Rio shook his head with a smile.

Seeing Rio’s face like that made Takahisa start to think of himself as small and insignificant, making him feel extremely panicked. “You seem like a nice guy, Haruto.” It was all he could do to keep his composure, barely able to squeeze those words out.

“That’s right — Haruto’s a very nice person. I’ve only known him for two days, but it feels like he’s a friend I’ve known for many years already,” Satsuki agreed with a giggle, looking at Rio. Francois, who had been observing silently until now, took notice of this statement and hummed his agreement with deep interest. Seated beside Francois, Charlotte noticed this with clarity.

“It’s an honor.” Rio chuckled, giving a small shrug of his shoulders.

“I’ve certainly felt a kind of closeness to Sir Haruto as well. He’s like my real older brother, in a way that’s different from Michel,” Charlotte suddenly said.

“Oh? Bwahaha, to think Charlotte would go as far as to say that. Rejoice, Haruto.” Francois immediately burst into laughter.

“…Yes, there is no higher honor.” Rio was a little confused by the flow of conversation, but replied humbly nonetheless.

“Actually, Lady Satsuki and I were talking about how we

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wanted to have Sir Haruto as our partner for the second and third nights of the banquet," Charlotte recalled.

"Wha — Char! W-Well, I did say that, but it was just because I was going with the flow of things..." Satsuki blushed in embarrassment; she had only been saying it as a joke at that time. True, she had said it because it didn't sound like a bad idea, but for some reason, she couldn't help but feel tremendously embarrassed to admit it.

"Oh? I was serious, though. Wouldn't you prefer Sir Haruto over an unknown gentleman, Lady Satsuki? You entered the venue on the first day with Father, but from the second day onwards it's more favorable to have a partner, you know?"

"W-Well, Haruto would certainly be a better choice than a stranger, but..." Satsuki admitted shyly.

Charlotte laughed impishly. "In that case, Father. Could Lady Satsuki and I accompany Sir Haruto as his partner for the second day of the banquet?"

"If you wish. And only if Lady Satsuki agrees. You do not mind either, do you, Haruto?" Francois' mouth turned upwards in a pleasant smile. He looked at Rio.

"...Yes, of course. But... are you sure?" Rio nodded his head, but he couldn't read Francois' intentions and probed further.

"It shows how much your achievements are valued. I bestow upon you the honor of escorting our kingdom's hero and the Second Princess. To put it simply: it's a kind of reward. Not to mention, we were having difficulty selecting a partner for Lady Satsuki to begin with. Wouldn't you consider this perfect? It's a great duty. Fulfill it well."

"It would be my pleasure..." Rio nodded. He wasn't in a position to choose a partner to begin with.

"But what will Miharu do? Miharu can't be saddled with a stranger for a partner either." Satsuki looked at her.

"In that case, Sir Takahisa is present. He seemed to be

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delighted to reunite with Lady Miharu, so I think it'd be the perfect opportunity for them to catch up with each other. Of course, it would be together with Princess Lilianna," Charlotte said cheerfully, looking at Takahisa and Lilianna.

"How wonderful. Of course I wouldn't mind. I wanted to speak to Lady Miharu myself," Lilianna agreed pleasantly.

"Of course I'd be up for that! No, please allow me the honor!" Takahisa offered himself up enthusiastically.

"Then it's decided. Oh, but if Lady Miharu is opposed to it, we'll have to find something else..." Charlotte said with a grin.

Miharu paused for a moment, but slowly shook her head. "...No, I also have things I'd like to talk to Takahisa about."

Charlotte looked at the clock in the room before addressing Francois. "In that case, Sir Takahisa and Princess Lilianna still haven't been escorted to their rooms, and it's almost time to get dressed up. Would you say it's about time to wrap up here, Father?"

"Indeed, you're right. We cannot have the guests of honor be tardy. I shall prepare another opportunity to sit and talk, either after the banquet or sometime tomorrow." Francois nodded deeply, then stood up quickly. He looked at the head servant waiting in the room and ordered them to escort Takahisa, Lilianna, and Rio.

"Sir Haruto, please look after me at the banquet tonight. Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu, please come this way. I shall lead you to the dressing room," Charlotte said, inviting Satsuki and Miharu along to the dressing room to prepare.

"Right. Let's get going," said Satsuki. They had arrived at the drawing parlor with nothing but the clothes on their back, but the gowns were already placed in the dressing room in the castle, so there was no need for Satsuki to return to her quarters.

Thus, the group disbanded for the moment.

"See you later then, Haruto." Satsuki and Miharu were

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escorted out of the room by Charlotte. Francois left with them as well.

“I shall lead you to the guest rooms. Please come this way,” the head servant said to Takahisa and Lilianna. A head servant also approached Rio and began to escort him to the men’s dressing room.

“Umm… Haruto.” Takahisa confirmed that Miharu and Satsuki had left the room before stopping in front of the door and addressing Rio behind him. At the same time, Lilianna and the female knights who were with him also stopped.

“Yes?” Rio came to a stop.

“Thank you so much for saving Miharu. Truly,” Takahisa said, bowing his head deeply at Rio.

“I’d like to offer my gratitude, too. With this, Sir Takahisa’s anguish has lessened significantly. There were voices that opposed us, but attending this banquet was the right choice.” Lilianna smiled innocently.

“No, I didn’t do anything special.” Rio shook his head with a gentle expression.

“…Well, I’d like to talk to you again sometime. For now, I’ll act as Miharu’s partner tonight, while Satsuki will be in your care.” Takahisa looked carefully at Rio and emphasized the ‘I’ and ‘Miharu.’ It was a materialization of Takahisa’s sense of rivalry.

“Yes, please take care of her.” Rio nodded with a faint smile.

“Uh…” Takahisa felt a faint restlessness in his chest when faced directly with the ease in Rio’s behavior. The fact that Miharu had been together with him this entire time flashed in his head, making that restlessness grow larger and larger.

“Well then, see you again later. I shouldn’t be the reason that the two of you are delayed.” Whether Rio knew what kind of mental state Takahisa was in or not, he bowed his head respectfully and ended the conversation there.

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Roughly one hour later, in one of the many rooms in a social hall adjacent to the Galarc royal castle…

Presently, the princess of a small country to the north of the Galarc Kingdom, Princess Sylvie Rubia of the Rubia Kingdom, faced two men plotting away secretly as she waited for the beginning of the banquet she was invited to.

“Lord Charles, will Her Majesty Princess Christina be attending as planned?” One man, a middle-aged man with a thin and sickly look to his face, questioned Charles, who had been dispatched from the main Beltrum Kingdom government.

“Of course we brought her,” Charles answered with a look at the seemingly unhappy Sylvie. “But why is the Rubia Kingdom princess here, Mr. Reiss?”

“That won’t do, Lord Charles. Tonight, I am Jean Benard. A goodwill ambassador and the second son of the Rubia Kingdom’s Duke Bernard, here accompanying Princess Sylvie. That’s my backstory.” Reiss shook his head.

“…My apologies, Lord Bernard. However, no matter our relationship, I would like you to explain this situation in more detail.” Charles shot a look at the still-displeased Princess Sylvie before questioning Reiss with a look. He was asking whether she was trustworthy.

“Of course. Did you know the small countries to the northern lands are a rivalry of warlords? The Rubia Kingdom was formerly in a favorable alliance with the Kingdom of Galarc, but has recently grown close to our country behind closed doors. That’s what it is,” Reiss said, smiling with deep meaning.

“…I do not recall my kingdom growing any closer to your motherland,” Sylvie grimaced, interrupting their conversation.

“That’s what she says, but rest assured: I have taken her

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little sister under my care as a sign of our friendship, so there is no way for her to betray us." Reiss shrugged with exasperation, speaking to Charles.

Charles looked at Sylvie with a cold sneer, before looking back to Reiss. "In that case, I understand. Then let us hear what you are scheming with Princess Christina, myself, and the hero, while the wretched Duke Huguenot faction throws their weight around at this banquet."

"Oh no, I would never scheme anything. The reason is as I told you in advance. Our kingdom simply cannot overlook this banquet where so many heroes are gathered at once. The reason I asked you to attend with your kingdom's First Princess and hero was to shake Duke Huguenot's faction, and the reason why I'm personally attending is to observe the enemy myself. That is all."

"How unexpected. I had assumed you were plotting something else with Princess Sylvie here..."

"The reason Princess Sylvie is here is because I am Jean Bernard from the Rubia Kingdom tonight. I am lightly disguised, but my goal is to observe, so I won't do anything that attracts attention, and I have been acquainted with you for a long time now. I thought I would greet you before we meet at the venue, so that you won't be surprised. Other than that, it seems like my acquaintanceship with the Rubia Kingdom will be ongoing for a while too, so I wanted to introduce you to Princess Sylvie," Reiss said, taking out a monocle from his breast pocket and putting it on.

"Bwahaha! It's my first time seeing you with a monocle on, but it suits you well. I see, I see. So that's how it is. It seems I was a bit too suspicious." Charles laughed heartily.

"Well, tonight's banquet should be a meaningful event for you as well. I'm sure you've heard of the Restoration's establishment already, no? It's a wonderful opportunity to gather information, so use it efficiently," Reiss said.

"Understood." Charles showed a hint of a bitter

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expression when he heard the word “Restoration,” but he soon replaced it with a bold look and sneer.

I will be using the banquet tonight efficiently myself. While half my goal is accomplished with my infiltration alongside Princess Sylvie, I must not let my guard down. But I shall have my fill of fun. Reiss grinned alongside Charles.

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Chapter 7: Banquet, Turmoil of Day 2

Later, on the first floor of the social hall adjacent to the Galarc royal castle, the second night of the banquet was set to begin. Many guests from other kingdoms had been invited by Galarc to attend the second night onwards and were currently entering the venue one after another. The smaller kingdoms present had a favorable relationship with Galarc, in contrast to the large kingdoms, which were in precarious relationships with the host kingdom. The Galarc Kingdom didn't have alliances with any large kingdoms east of the center of the Strahl region — at most, they had a cordial relationship with the Restoration, Beltrum Kingdom's special administration to the west of Galarc. Beltrum's main government had been distancing themselves for a while now, and the Centostella Kingdom to the south refused all diplomatic relations.

However, both the near-estranged Beltrum government and Centostella were attending tonight. The air around the banquet felt exceptional, their presence creating a strange mood among the invited guests, gathering the attention of several small kingdoms. On top of that, it was the first time the disaffected Huguenot faction would come face to face with the main Beltrum government in public, which would have inevitable repercussions, too.

And so, the nobles already in the hall were all impatiently waiting for the official guests from Strahl's large kingdoms to arrive.

Normally, when a banquet was held in the name of the

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king of a large kingdom, it was custom for the attending kingdoms to send their own royalty as a representative, but the order of introduction was one-sidedly decided by the host kingdom based on national power and diplomatic relations. Thus, the attendees all looked forward to seeing what order the outside kingdoms would be introduced.

Presently, most of the officials from the small kingdoms had entered already, leaving only the more powerful small kingdoms to go.

“Rubia Kingdom’s First Princess, Princess Sylvie, has arrived!” The announcer’s voice echoed through the hall. The door on the upper floor of the hall opened, revealing Sylvie herself.

Sylvie wasn’t attending with a partner, and instead had five servants accompanying her.

“Ooh, if it isn’t the Princess Knight, Sylvie.”

“What a dignified woman, as always.”

“She normally attends events with her sister instead of a male partner, but I don’t see her little sister this time. It’s rare to catch her alone.”

The eyes of the male nobles were more passionate than for any of the other small kingdom royalty introduced until now. A few female nobles were also watching Sylvie with heated gazes.

Sylvie Rubia — the First Princess of the Rubia Kingdom who had been in a private talk with Reiss and Charles moments ago. She was in her late teens.

She was tall and slender for a woman, her alluring appearance highlighted by her dignified facial structure and beautiful blonde hair that reached down her back. Her most notable feature was the pure white dress she wore. It didn’t have a cute design like those of the other female nobles — its peculiar style nearly resembling ritualistic battlewear; it seemed to only be missing a sword around her waist. As a young lady, her body had a softness relative to her age, but

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the way she held herself was like that of a warrior.

In reality, her nickname of “Princess Knight” wasn’t for nothing, as Sylvie acted as a knight despite being royalty. Because of that oddity, Sylvie’s name was widespread, despite being a small kingdom’s princess.

Meanwhile, as the nobles in the hall focused their attention on Sylvie, Hiroaki was getting excited as he stood outside the door on the upper floor of the hall.

“Wow, a Princess Knight! In the flesh! Seeing a Princess Knight was a bucket list must for coming to a fantasy world. I’ve been waiting for this moment! If it’s possible, I’d like to hear her say the words ‘j-just kill me!’ too… Whew!” Hiroaki had been completely obsessed with other world fantasies while he was on Earth, so seeing a princess knight was like a dream come true for him. His inner fanboy shone through when he found out that Sylvie was also known as the Princess Knight, leaving him cheering excitedly even after she had entered the hall.

Most of the small kingdoms that were invited had already entered, leaving only the most influential of the small kingdoms and the large kingdoms left. Incidentally, Duke Huguenot and Charles were among those remaining, but while the fated rivals were within each other’s view, they both chose to ignore the other and stand in the corners of the corridor in silence.

Roanna was right beside Hiroaki, watching his excitement with a somewhat strained smile. Just then, a boy approached Hiroaki. He looked to be in his mid to late teens, his silky golden hair falling across his handsome face.

“…May I ask, out of curiosity, what did you mean by ‘just kill me’?” the golden-haired boy asked Hiroaki.

“…Ah? Mind your own business.” Hiroaki’s mood was immediately soured as he glared at the boy.

“How harsh. We may be affiliated with different powers — I was hoping we could get along for at least tonight, as a

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fellow Japanese person.” The blond haired boy shrugged with a faint smile.

“The halfie with the natural airhead face can shut up. I have nothing to say to you.” Hiroaki had apparently decided to despise the blond boy.

The blond boy showed no discouragement as he immediately went on to address Roanna, who was beside Hiroaki. “In that case, may I ask you the same question instead?”

“Oh, umm. No, I don’t know either…” Roanna was having a hard time answering, which was understandable. The boy standing before Roanna was someone she couldn’t interact with freely, even as the daughter of a duke.

“Hey, you bastard. Don’t go chatting up my Roanna right in front of me. Seriously — playboys need to stay in their own lane. Normies like you who try to play innocent disgust me the most.” Hiroaki made his irritation clear as he flared up at the blond boy.

“I wasn’t going to make a move on her…”

“So shameless… Guys like you end up ruining your own friendships all the time. You say you won’t make a move, but then the woman your friend likes falls for you,” Hiroaki said with an annoyed frown.

“Ahaha, you say that like you’ve experienced it yourself,” the blond-haired boy said in return.

“Tch. Bastard can’t get the hint… Go back to your partner already.”

“Unfortunately, she’s still getting ready. Though she should be here soon.”

“Ah? Well, if it’s a hero you want to talk to, there’s another one besides me. Look, go talk to that woman there,” Hiroaki said, gaze turning towards Satsuki, who was walking over with Rio and Charlotte’s group.

“Oh, so she is the one from the Sumeragi Group…” the blond boy narrowed his eyes at Satsuki’s face and muttered.

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“…Long time no see, Shigekura Rui. I wondered if it was you when I heard the name of the hero summoned in Beltrum. What an odd twist of fate,” Satsuki said to the blond boy. His name was Shigekura Rui, the hero summoned to the main Beltrum government.

“How odd indeed. I never imagined that another acquaintance of mine would end up in the same world,” Rui agreed with a strained smile.

“Ah? You guys know each other?” Hiroaki furrowed his brows in doubt.

“Yeah, through our parents’ connections. We’ve exchanged a few words in the past, enough to know each other’s name and face,” said Rui.

“Ah, so you’re rich kids, then. So people living the high life exist in Japan too, huh? No wonder you can’t get the hint.” Hiroaki looked at the two of them as though he was seeing something odd.

“E-Excuse me?” Satsuki’s brows twitched together, her face stiffening. Just then, Flora came up to Hiroaki.

“I’m sorry for the delay, great hero. Changing took longer than expected.”

“You’re here, Flora. No, it’s alright. If you got here any earlier you would’ve just been bothered by a creep,” Hiroaki replied with a smirk. Out of regard for Flora, Satsuki pouted her lips and sighed silently, swallowing her indignation.

“Might you be Princess Christina’s little sister?” Rui asked Flora, his eyes widening.

“…Yes.” Flora nodded fearfully.

“Oh my, speaking of which, Princess Christina has just arrived.” Charlotte, who had been talking to Rio a short distance away, looked towards the end of the corridor. There, wearing the same lavender dress as Flora, was Christina. She was making her way towards Rui.

“I’m sorry for the wait, great hero,” Christina said to Rui first. Flora was in her field of vision, but she acted as though

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she hadn't noticed her at all.

"Not at all. There's still time until we enter the hall, and I just arrived earlier myself." In reality, Rui had been waiting for quite some time now, but he didn't breathe a word of that.

"Long time no see, Princess Christina." Charlotte sprang forward lightly and addressed Christina with a smile.

"Yes, it's been a while, Princess Charlotte. Thank you for your invitation to this honorable banquet," Christina with a friendly and elegant smile.

"No, no, we've been establishing a secret relationship with the Restoration recently, but we also became more estranged with the main Beltrum government, which I found very sad. I didn't have high hopes, so I'm so happy to see you accepted our invitation," Charlotte said with an honest smile.

"The fact that the Galarc Kingdom backed a side in our kingdom's internal affairs is, at the very least, seen as a problem. However… I attended today in hopes that it could assist in repairing the gap between our kingdoms," Christina replied flawlessly.

"Why, that would be splendid. Don't you agree, Princess Flora? You haven't seen your sister in a while, no? How about taking this opportunity to exchange some words?" Charlotte looked at Flora and heavily touched upon the delicate topic.

Flora gazed at Christina and gulped before opening her mouth. "Umm, Sister…"

"Unfortunately, I did not come all the way here to exchange words with those who have deserted our kingdom," Christina said, curtly refusing the interaction with Flora. Charles and the other nobles of the Beltrum government observed the scene from a distance.

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“Uh…” Flora flinched.

“Oh, what a harsh world it is.” Charlotte expressed her exaggerated disappointment with a sigh.

“Oh? So you won’t even exchange words with me, the hero?” Hiroaki joined the conversation with a bold grin.

“No, the great hero was summoned through the sacred stone belonging to the Beltrum main government, so we are prepared to welcome you at any moment. I apologize for the delayed introduction — I am the Beltrum Kingdom’s First Princess, Christina. It’s an honor to meet you,” Christina said fluently, pinching the hem of her dress to greet Hiroaki gracefully.

Hiroaki was captivated by Christina’s elegant appearance and mannerisms for a moment, before suddenly calming down. “…Ah, well. With how similar you look to Flora, there’s no denying you’re sisters. You have a pretty face too. Though the aura you exude is fairly different.”

“It’s an honor to receive the great hero’s compliment. I hope we have a cordial time tonight. The heroes from my kingdom are eagerly awaiting a chance to meet you as well.” Christina pasted a smile on her face as she spoke to Hiroaki.

“Well, I suppose I could listen to what they want to say. But nothing more than that,” said Hiroaki.

“Please do. Incidentally, I would love to greet the hero of the Galarc Kingdom as well. Might that be you?” Christina nodded with a smile before turning her gaze to Satsuki next.

“Yes. It’s nice to meet you, Princess Christina. I’m Satsuki Sumeragi, the hero summoned to the Galarc Kingdom. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Satsuki said in a ladylike manner.

“I am most obliged by your polite greeting. My name is Christina, the First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom.” Christina returned the greeting with a royal air about her.

“Now, allow me to introduce Lady Satsuki and my partner for tonight, Sir Haruto. Sir Haruto, please come this way.”

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Charlotte turned around and called out to Rio, who was watching quietly from a short distance away.

“He is the partner for the two of you tonight? It’s our first time meeting… right?” Christina stared closely at Rio’s face and cocked her head in wonder. At the same time, Flora stiffened and watched them with bated breath.

“Of course it’s your first time meeting. Sir Haruto isn’t a noble, but rather a great hero who stepped into the spotlight recently.” Charlotte smiled cheerily.

“A great hero, you say?” Christina continued to stare closely at Rio. The title of “great hero” was fairly exaggerated, so it was understandable for her to be curious. Rui was also watching Rio with deep interest, his attention focused solely on him.

“Yes. If you could introduce yourself directly, Sir Haruto.” Charlotte oozed confidence as she nodded.

“It’s nice to meet you, Your Highness. As stated, I am Haruto. While it is not appropriate for me to receive the title of ‘great hero’ in the presence of true heroes, I am most honored to be in your audience,” Rio said to Christina reverently, showing humility.

“…It’s nice to meet you too. His mannerisms are reminiscent of a high-ranking veteran knight… May I ask what feat he accomplished?” Christina’s eyes widened faintly as she asked Charlotte.

“Why, it’s beyond what words can describe… To summarize, he saved Lady Satsuki’s close friend, Lady Miharu, repelled a demi-dragon and tsunami of monsters, saved Liselotte Cretia, who is a noblewoman from our kingdom, and finally, he rescued your little sister, Princess Flora, when she was abducted!” Charlotte stared back at Christina and smiled as though she saw through her thoughts.

“…When she was abducted?” Christina asked, focusing on that part alone.

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“Oh? Are you worried for your sister after all? It seems like the events that happened at Amande have yet to reach you,” Charlotte said with mischievous delight.

“...No,” Christina erased her expression and shook her head. The first thing that came to her mind when she heard Flora was abducted was the kidnapping incident from when Christina was seven.

However, the one who saved Flora back then was an orphan boy the same age as Christina. He had been admitted into the Royal Academy as a reward and demonstrated truly excellent abilities there, but his origins as an orphan and black hair from his immigrant background meant he was isolated from his classmates. Ultimately, he was slighted at the kingdom’s convenience and disappeared afterward. There was no knowing where he was now...

...It couldn’t be, right? His name and hair color are both different. The incident Princess Charlotte is referring to isn’t the same one, anyway. Christina stared at Haruto’s androgynous face. For a moment, Rio surfaced at the back of her mind, but she soon banished that thought.

“Oh, it looks like Takahisa and the others are here.” Satsuki looked towards the back of the corridor and noticed Takahisa, Lilianna, and Miharu approaching them. Behind them were three female knights.

“Tch, the other hero’s another hunk, huh? And he only has women in tow...” Hiroaki muttered in disgust. As he was doing so, Takahisa and the others spotted Satsuki and came right up to her.

“Sorry for the wait, everyone,” Takahisa said in a refreshing tone.

“The Centostella Kingdom’s hero is here too? This means all the heroes who were invited to the banquet are attending.” Charlotte looked around at the heroes gathered and giggled.

The Galarc Kingdom’s hero, Sumeragi Satsuki. The

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Centostella Kingdom’s hero, Sendo Takahisa. The Beltrum Kingdom’s hero, Shigekura Rui. The Restoration’s hero, Sakata Hiroaki. These four heroes were assembled, together, for the first time.

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“Hmm…” Hiroaki snorted in displeasure. Despite doing so, he had a smug grin on his face, as though he was enjoying the feeling of being someone special.

“I’m sure you’ve all been informed already, but the heroes and their partners — as well as any other attendants — will all enter the venue together. As the princess of the host kingdom, I will be taking the lead with Lady Satsuki and Sir Haruto, so please understand that. For now, we are to wait here,” Charlotte explained smoothly. Unlike the first night of the banquet, King Francois and First Prince Michel were already in the venue to welcome the guests from the smaller kingdoms.

“Ah, I have no intention of getting along with the normies. Let’s go, Flora, Roanna.” Hiroaki took his own partners and relocated them a small distance away.

“Honestly, what an uncooperative man. I’m astounded he can act so smugly just because he happened to get caught up in all this.” Satsuki said, watching Hiroaki’s back with disapproval.

“He seems like a difficult person to please.” Rui gave a small shrug.

“Well, I do agree that we don’t need to act more familiar with each other than necessary.” Satsuki sighed despite herself.

“Indeed. We’ve all established our own positions too, after all. That being said, I’m sure there are things we want to ask each other, so some compromise may be necessary,” Rui agreed.

“Oh, what kinds of things were you thinking of?” Satsuki smiled innocently.

“Ahaha, how harsh of you. Well, if I had to say, then perhaps something about the sorcery hidden in the sacred stones used to summon us to this world?” Rui said, trying to ask about a way to return to Earth in a roundabout manner.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way of returning to Earth,”

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Satsuki replied bluntly.

“I see, so it’s as I feared. The other possibility I considered was the sorcery hidden in the equally-powerful divine arms… You saw a dream about how to handle the divine arms too, right?” Rui asked Satsuki in an intellectual tone.

“Yes, the one where an unknown voice lectured me, right?”

“Right. It seems like everyone who possesses divine arms sees a dream, then. In my case, I was given no information other than how to handle the divine arms. What about you?”

“Me, too. It didn’t seem like I could hold a conversation with them, and I woke up before I knew it. What about you, Takahisa?” Satsuki shook her head exaggeratedly to emphasize her point.

“Nope, mine was the same as the two of you,” said Takahisa.

“I haven’t introduced myself yet — my name is Shigekura Rui.” Rui gave a friendly smile to Takahisa and Miharu and Lilianna beside him. “As you can see, I’m half-Japanese and lived in the United States until I was sixteen, but I’m a Japanese native, and I was a seventeen-year-old high schooler.”

“That makes you my upperclassman by one year. I’m Sendo Takahisa. Likewise, I was a high schooler. Though I only just entered…” Takahisa said with a bitter smile. When Rui stuck out his hand for a handshake, Takahisa returned it.

“I see. It’s nice to meet you. By the way, you’re Japanese too, right?” Rui asked, looking at Miharu.

“Yes. I’m Ayase Miharu. I’m the same age as Takahisa and one year below Satsuki. Pleased to meet you.” Miharu seemed to be slightly nervous, as she straightened her posture and introduced herself in a stiff voice.

“The pleasure is mine. Your dress suits you very well. I always thought Japanese women suited Japanese-styled

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clothes better, but I'll have to reevaluate that thought." Rui looked into Miharu's eyes, extending his hand for a handshake like he'd done with Takahisa.

"Umm, thank you very much," Miharu said hesitantly. She faltered for a moment, wondering if she should return the handshake, before Takahisa stepped in first.

"Sorry, Miharu isn't very comfortable around men," he informed Rui curtly.

Rui's eyes widened slightly before he smiled. "Ah, is that so? Do excuse me. It was custom to use handshakes over bowing in the U.S."

"No, it's fine. I'm sorry for the trouble," Miharu said with a friendly shake of her head. "Takahisa, don't be rude," she added quietly, this time offering her own hand out for Rui.

Rui shook hands with Miharu before smiling happily. "Thank you very much. I'd like to ask Haruto and the other two there for a handshake too, but I fear they may be with Takahisa and Haruto. I'll hold back." He looked at Lilianna and Charlotte and smiled jokingly.

"No, I am simply her partner for tonight — here by Her Highness' will. Pleased to make your acquaintance, great hero," Rio chuckled, offering his hand out for Rui to shake. Rui returned the gesture happily.

"Same here, great hero," Rui replied with no sign of sarcasm.

"Oh, am I not worth getting jealous over?" Charlotte pouted cutely. Rio could only give a strained smile.

"It's an unspoken rule that men and women only shake hands in official settings if they have a close relationship. Otherwise, it may be best to refrain from doing it during a first meeting. No one will dare speak against the hero, but there may be people who are bothered by it on the inside. At any rate, I am Lilianna Centostella. It's an honor to meet you, Sir Shigekura," Lilianna said succinctly.

"I see. I learned something new today." Rui nodded

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cheerfully.

“Miharu, Lily, do you guys have a moment?” Takahisa took Miharu and Lily’s hands, moving them a short distance away.

“Huh? O-Okay.” Miharu casually disentangled her hand and moved with Lilianna. This left Rio, Satsuki, Charlotte, Rui and Christina behind.

“Hehe, it looks like Sir Takahisa and Sir Hiroaki are both gentlemen with a strong possessive nature,” Charlotte said once Takahisa left.

“H-Hey, Char, you can’t say that,” Satsuki chided with a half smile.

“Hahaha. Every man has a little bit of a possessive desire within them. Even I do.” Rui laughed heartily.

“Why, is that so? Then Princess Christina…?” Charlotte asked with excitement, exuding curiosity.

“Princess Christina is a lovely woman, but I have someone I love already. I don’t consider myself possessive over her.” Rui shook his head bluntly.

“Yes. I’m only here as a royal figure. Like Haruto over there, I am simply acting as a partner for one night,” Christina said with a small smile. It almost seemed as though she was mocking herself, but the reason didn’t appear to be because Rui’s feelings weren’t directed towards her.

Charlotte could sense that the relationship between Rui and Christina was a businesslike one and sighed in disappointment. “Why, how candid of you to say so. But this leaves those three to wonder about. If I may ask, Lady Satsuki, were Sir Takahisa and Lady Miharu going out with each other?”

“Hmm, I wonder. There were rumors in middle school that they may have been, but…” Satsuki said, then glanced at Rio.

“…” Rio was watching Miharu and the others in silence.

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Just then, the door to the hall opened and a knight stepped in.

“Lady Charlotte, preparations in the venue are complete,” the knight reported.

“Everyone, it sounds like they’re ready. Please, this way.”

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Meanwhile, on the first floor of the social hall, the royalty from each small kingdom had finally finished entering the venue and were eagerly awaiting the entrance of the four heroes. In the corner of the hall, the Rubia Kingdom’s First Princess Sylvie and her attendants were chatting with the royalty from neighboring kingdoms.

“Introducing the Galarc Kingdom hero, Lady Satsuki Sumeragi, the Restoration’s hero, Sir Hiroaki Sakata, the Centostella Kingdom’s hero, Sir Takahisa Sendo, and Beltrum Kingdom’s hero, Sir Rui Shigekura!” The voice of the announcer echoed. The royalty and nobility in the hall burst into chatter as the door on the upper floor opened.

The first to appear was Satsuki, escorted by Rio and Charlotte. The men from the smaller kingdoms were familiar with Charlotte already, so their attention was focused on Satsuki and Rio.

The younger princesses were watching Rio with particular interest. With his glossy gray hair, his androgynous but sharp and intense features, and his confident attitude while escorting a hero and princess, Rio truly was picture perfect.

As that was happening, Hiroaki appeared next in the doorway. He was accompanied by Flora and Roanna, but unlike Rio, there was no element of surprise here. And so, the nobles in the hall applauded loudly to welcome them, but otherwise didn’t make a fuss.

“Ooh!”

Next to appear was Takahisa, Lilianna, and Miharu. The

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Centostella Kingdom had shut down all diplomatic relations with their neighboring kingdoms; despite being a large kingdom, the faces of their royalty were pretty much unknown, so the amount of attention they received was quite high. There were bigger cheers for them than for Hiroaki, and the people in the venue strained their eyes to burn the image of the three into their minds.

Finally, the last ones to appear were Shigekura Rui and Christina.

“Ooh…” The nobles in the hall raised their voices. Rather than cheers, this was closer to the stirring that occurred as with Rio. The reason was, of course, because of the internal issues the Beltrum Kingdom was currently experiencing.

The Beltrum Kingdom’s First and Second Princess, representatives of opposing factions, were both attending. In other words: Christina and Flora. The attendees were extremely curious about how the two would interact with each other.

Ah, did it seem like the nobles had a weaker reaction towards me? Is it too predictable of me to bring the same partners two days in a row? Or are faces what matter more for heroes in the end? Tch, I should have asked Liselotte to come too… Hiroaki was displeased with how the cheers for him were weaker in comparison to the other heroes and frowned unhappily.

In contrast to Hiroaki’s mood, the royalty and nobility on the lower floor were reaching the peak of their excitement now that the four heroes had arrived, their eyes glued to them. Behind them, Duke Huguenot, Charles Arbor, and all the other official figures entered the venue and continued to make their way down the stairs, but not many paid attention to them.

Afterward, the opening speech that Francois was to give before the second day of the banquet finally began. During said speech, one person quietly attempted to slip through

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the cheering crowds. It was Reiss, who had snuck in among the Rubia Kingdom attendants.

“Oi, Rei— Jean. Jean Bernard, where do you think you’re going?” Sylvie noticed Reiss trying to sneak away in the commotion and immediately called out to him. She had been constantly aware of Reiss the whole night, unwilling to let her guard down.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a little business with the wall. Worry not, I shall be back soon. If you’re anxious, you may have someone else accompany me,” Reiss said with a cheery grin. For the record, “business with the wall” was slang for “going to the toilet.”

“...Tch, be back within ten. Hey.” Sylvie ordered Reiss, then sent a signal to one of her female knights to follow him.

“Understood. If you’d excuse me.” Reiss nodded respectfully, then departed with the female knight. He proceeded to leave the hall and head for the restroom.

The corridors were packed with patrolling soldiers, strictly ensuring that no one wandered where they shouldn’t be. In particular, several soldiers had taken up positions before the door to the upper hall to make it impossible to reach Satsuki and others inside.

Reiss narrowed his eyes when he spotted the staircase that led to the upper floor.

“...Hey, walk faster,” the female knight ordered Reiss unhappily.

“Rushing someone in need? I can’t say I’m impressed. Ten minutes is plenty of time to return, so there’s no need to be impatient,” Reiss replied airily.

“Tch.” The female knight clicked her tongue in annoyance, but continued to follow Reiss to the restroom in silence. The toilets were in individual stalls and quite spacious inside. There was a small window for ventilation, but no entrance other than the door.

The female knight opened the door and checked there was

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no way to escape before hurrying Reiss along. “Make it quick.”

“Yes, I’ll be out soon,” Reiss said, stepping into the stall alone. “As expected of a social hall toilet. They’ve built it so pointlessly large, it’s like they’re asking for intruders to be invited. Perhaps I shall leave it around here, then.” Reiss took out two essence crystals the size of a fist from his breast pocket and placed them both on the floor. One was a magic artifact to set coordinates for teleportation sorcery, and the other was an artifact with sealing barrier sorcery to prevent the fluctuation of ode and mana from being externally detected.

Preparations complete. All that’s left is for the troops set to ambush to arrive once it’s time. But with the boy we confronted in Amande in attendance, this may turn out interesting. I couldn’t sense his contract spirit around, but it could either be lying in wait inside his body in spirit form or moving about on its own. Reiss looked down at the artifacts on the floor in satisfaction, recalling Rio’s face when he entered with Satsuki and Charlotte.

However, his presence won’t be a hindrance this time. As long as the troops rush into the venue as planned, it will be plenty sufficient as an opening move. No matter which way it goes afterward, my mission is complete. Thinking of it that way makes it so easy. I think I’ll spend the rest of my time watching the chaos of the hall and how he intervenes, Reiss thought, a sneer at his mouth. Then, roughly ten seconds later, he opened the stall door as though he had just finished his business.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Now, let us head back,” Reiss said and returned to the banquet hall.

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About one hour later, large numbers of royalty and

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nobility took turns visiting the upper floor to greet the heroes from each power. However, as Satsuki and Hiroaki had completed their greetings of the Galarc and Restoration nobles yesterday, they only had the officials from small kingdoms greeting them.

Because of this, they had fewer people gathering around them than Takahisa and Rui, and the burden was lessened on Rio and Charlotte.

At the same time, Miharu, who was acting as Takahisa's partner, was being pressed to respond to a greater number of people than yesterday, partly due to the rarely-seen Centostella Kingdom. Furthermore, King Francois and First Prince Michel were proactively moving around to engage the foreign nobles in conversation.

"Speaking of which, Princess Charlotte. Do you need to greet the foreign officials along with His Majesty and Prince Michel as well?" Rio asked Charlotte during a break in the rush of people.

"No, I'm fine. Father said I should focus on being an assistant to Lady Satsuki and a partner to you, Sir Haruto. Thankfully, that means I am able to stay with you two for the whole night." Charlotte smiled happily, closing the distance between herself and Rio by stepping closer to him.

"...Be that as it may, Char, you seem fairly fond of Haruto there." Satsuki noticed how close Charlotte's sense of distance was and gave her an inquiring look.

"Why, of course. Sir Haruto is a very well-mannered and kind gentleman. It's like I've made a new older brother," Charlotte answered, leaning coquettishly against Rio's arm.

"Hmm..." Satsuki looked at Rio with slightly reproachful eyes. "Don't you think you're a little too close for that? Right, Haruto?" she asked implicitly.

"Princess Charlotte. While it's an honor to have you say that..." Rio trailed off, showing his discomfort in a roundabout way.

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“Am I a bother?” Charlotte tugged gently on Rio’s arm, bringing him closer to her still-growing breasts.

“No, not at all…” Rio struggled to reply.

“Good for you, Haruto. Congrats on your new, cute little sister.” Satsuki said in a standoffish way, pouting slightly.

…*Hmph. Why am I feeling a little irritated?* Satsuki thought, feeling confused by her own state of mind.

“People may misunderstand our relationship if you act too familiarly, so it may be better to refrain from anything excessive,” Rio persuaded Charlotte softly.

“Why not let them misunderstand?” Charlotte looked up at Rio’s face, giving him a bewitching expression unfitting for her age. Or so one would think.

Charlotte giggled cheekily and stepped back from Rio, then peered up at his face and batted her eyelashes. “Jokes aside, Sir Haruto, what happened to the promise you made me about asking me out for a dance?”

“Hmm, so you promised such a thing,” Satsuki said curiously.

“Yes. As a woman, I would have liked to have been asked for a dance first, but as a princess, I shall yield the first turn to Lady Satsuki. Now, why don’t the two of you go and dance?” Charlotte said.

“No… Well, if Haruto asks me for a dance, I suppose I shall give him a dance.” Satsuki’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she turned away from Rio.

“May I have your hand for one song, Lady Satsuki?” Rio extended his hand dramatically, a slightly amused smile on his face.

“Then, for just one song…” Satsuki took Rio’s hand hesitantly.

However, just at that very moment, the door on the upper floor of the hall burst open with great force. Everyone in the hall — including Rio and the others — reflexively looked towards the door. Masked men dressed in black outfits and

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wielding daggers came rushing through the door.

“K-Kyaah!” the women in the hall screamed. The intruders coming through the first floor door ran towards the stairs, sneaking past the chaos of the hall to aim for the staircase leading to the upper floor.

“What?!”

“Get away! Go!”

“Run for it!”

The guests on the first floor all panicked.

“C-Calm down!”

“Let us through!”

“Repel the enemy!”

The security knights patrolling the venue yelled above the commotion. They tried to intercept the assailants, but most of them were being shoved back by the crowds and unable to take action. The attackers took that chance to close in on the staircase, ignoring the other attendees.

Meanwhile, the intruders on the upper floor were trying to attack the heroes and royals who had been chatting away with the guests.

“Protect the royal family and heroes!” Security on the upper floor was stricter than below. Including royalty from the Galarc Kingdom, the heroes, and officials from the other kingdoms, there were only about thirty attendees on the upper floor, making it easier for the knights to move in and create a wall to block the attackers.

There were twenty assailants that had come in through the upper floor door, so with thirty security guards they had the advantage in numbers to repel them, but the attackers were desperate, putting their lives on the line to break through the wall of knights. “Charge from the front and sides! Break through!”

“Don’t let them through! Everyone, gather together behind us!” The commanding knight of the upper floor yelled.

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“This way, you two.” Rio immediately moved Satsuki and Charlotte towards the back of the human shield the knights were providing. Miharu, Takahisa, Lilianna, Christina, Rui, Flora, Hiroaki, and Roanna, as well as Francois and Michel, swiftly moved as they were told, knowing they were key targets.

“Hey hey, this is no joke. Gather behind you? They’re coming up the stairs as well! At this rate, we’ll be sandwiched in!” Hiroaki watched the assailants rapidly approaching from below in a panic, then searched his surroundings for an escape. However, there was only one staircase connecting the upper and lower floors, and the area near the upper floor door was filled with awaiting assailants.

There was nowhere to run — they could only wait for the knights to repel the attackers. However, the attackers seemed to have simulated the attack in advance, as there was no hesitation in their movements and each one of them moved with quite a bit of finesse.

While the knights were winning in numbers, the upper floor’s forces were evenly matched.

Meanwhile, the knights squeezing through the crowds on the first floor attempted to block the advancement of the attackers, but as the attackers were a group of around twenty, there was nothing one or two knights could do.

The knights were moving at their own discretion due to their high skill levels as individuals, but that was what was currently ruining them. There were more knights than attackers on the first floor, but as they were scattered all over the large hall, they were being outnumbered in a focused area.

The attackers wielded daggers with the intention of killing, the knights had clubs with no intention of killing, but there wasn’t much difference in arms. However, the attackers coordinated together to take on each lone knight, so the first floor knights were being held back. At this rate, it

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was only a matter of time before they ran up the stairs.

This doesn't look like a good situation. The knights are starting to gather at the foot of the staircase, but there's still too few of them. They'll come up the stairs like this. Rio looked downstairs and processed the situation calmly, before looking at the fight taking place on the upper floor once again. The knights on their side seemed to be managing to repel the attackers, so they weren't going to break through soon.

"Wh…" Miharu and Satsuki were frozen in fear. It was probably their first time seeing a battle take place in the flesh, so it was no wonder they were overwhelmed by what was happening.

"Satsuki, stay here with Princess Charlotte. Don't move from here, either, Miharu. I am going to stop their invasion from below," Rio said, having assessed the situation in mere seconds.

Aishia, can you check what's happening on the upper floor in your spirit form?

Got it, Aishia replied immediately. At the same time, Rio ran for the staircase.

"Wai— Haruto?!" Satsuki saw Rio heading for the staircase and called after him in a panic. She reflexively tried to follow him. But Charlotte grabbed Satsuki's dress first.

"Lady Satsuki, there's nothing you can do dressed like that. Please follow Sir Haruto's directions. It would be terrible for the kingdom if something happened to you, the hero." Charlotte said, persuading Satsuki to stop. Her tone was more serious than usual, showing a glimpse of her sense of duty as a royal.

"Ugh…" Satsuki grinded her teeth in frustration.

"It's okay. Haruto is strong. Please believe in him." Miharu ran over to Satsuki and joined in persuading her. However, her hand that grasped Satsuki's dress was trembling slightly.

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“Argh, fine! Whatever!” Satsuki accepted in frustration, but remained where she was. Takahisa came running after Miharu in a panic, bringing along Lilianna and her three knight guards.

“M-Miharu, don’t move on your own,” Takahisa said with a slightly flustered look.

“Hilda, if worst comes to worst, use your wall magic at your own discretion to protect us and the other heroes,” Lilianna ordered one of the female knights. The upper floor of the hall had over thirty people present, but it would have been impossible to create a magic wall for them all with just the three of them. Thus, they had to limit the number of targets to protect.

However, even then, there were still slightly greater numbers than would be feasible.

Hilda paused for a brief moment before agreeing. “…Understood. I shall see it through.”

“Tch, they’re coming up the stairs!” Hiroaki yelled. Six knights had gone around the front of the stairs, but fourteen assailants had reached the stairs. They probably wouldn’t be able to fend them off.

“Everyone downstairs! I shall assist you, so feel free to let through any opponents you cannot handle. *Augendae Corporis!”* Rio took up position halfway down the stairs and called out to the knights below. Then he chanted the spell to activate the bracelet containing physical strengthening sorcery. However, that was simply camouflage that he canceled as soon as it activated, as he instead strengthened his body with spirit arts.

“Ah, the rumored hero. That’s some confidence, but we’ll take your word for it! You lot, don’t die pushing yourselves! Only take on as many as you can handle!” The highest ranked knight by the stairs ordered the other knights.

If they died for nothing, they’d simply be shifting the burden onto someone else. The fact he didn’t tell them to try

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dying was proof he had a rational head on his shoulders.

“Yes, sir!” The other knights each readied their weapons and clashed with the attackers at the bottom of the staircase.

“Six of you, hold them off!” Six of the assailants moved towards the knights at the foot of the staircase, while the other eight all ran up the stairs. Rio stood in their way.

“Allow me to assist in what little way I can. This should reduce the numbers a bit. Don’t move!” Shigekura Rui took his divine bow in hand and stood on the stairs behind Rio. He pulled his bow ready, took aim, and fired a lightning arrow.

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The lightning arrow pierced through one of the attackers in the back. “Guah?!” He was sent flying, a tremendous electric current running through his body, instantly rendering him incapable of fighting.

Rui proceeded to fire one more arrow and pierced through another assailant. But, at that point, the attackers had already drawn near Rio, and the battle on the staircase was getting messy. Determining that the shot would be reckless, he lowered his bow.

“...I leave the rest to you!” Rui yelled, retreating back.

“Understood,” Rio replied, then charged down the stairs. He used the downwards momentum to close in on the attacker in the lead.

“Hah, ah... Guh?!” The attacker reacted to Rio’s movements and thrust out his dagger. However, Rio skillfully avoided the knife-wielding hand and flung the dagger into the distance. Then, he landed his bare fist into the solar plexus of the enemy, knocking him unconscious.

That’s one. Rio looked around at the attackers warily. Then, for one brief instant, the attackers movements faltered. Rio aimed for that moment and closed in on them from a diagonal approach.

“Ah?!” One of the attackers sensed Rio’s advance and reflexively swung his dagger at his torso. However, Rio had read the path of trajectory and swiftly grabbed his hand, restraining it with a powerful knee to the stomach. The attacker’s yell sounded more like a gasp for air.

Two down. Rio closed in on an attacker that had been trying to run past him while he was occupied. He sent a sharp blow of his palm into their side.

“Gah?” The attacker’s body folded like a leaf, sending him crashing to the floor before another assailant trying to run up.

Three.

“Tch!” On the spur of the moment, the assailant leaped

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over the body of his ally. But in that time, Rio had already jumped with a running start, wrapped around ahead of the attacker, and aimed a kick at his face as he was about to land, pushing him back down the stairs. "…" The attacker's mask crumbled as he rolled down the stairs, landing in complete silence.

And four. Two more to go, he counted calmly as he landed on the staircase.

"Ugh…" There were two attackers left. Having four of their comrades finished off in ten seconds made them come to a pause. They could sense that it would be impossible to force their way.

"Whoa…" Satsuki, who was watching Rio fight from the top of the stairs, found herself captivated by his tremendous fighting capability. The same went for Miharu, Flora, and Christina.

"The other knights have their hands full fighting one on one, and yet…" Charlotte watched Rio's fight take place below with wide eyes.

"Archer!" The two assailants Rio was facing moved. One of them yelled loudly, charging towards Rio in a self-sacrificial move.

…*Archer?* Instantly, Rio felt suspicious. Neither of them had a bow equipped.

Was it a bluff? A hidden weapon? No… Did they mean Rui? Rio listed off a variety of possibilities as he braced himself, observing the attackers every move as they positioned themselves in a line.

"Ngh!" The assailant in the front charged with desperation, thrusting his dagger-wielding right hand forward. He wasn't focusing on aiming anywhere — it was simply a thrust focusing on speed. Rio calmly parried the assailant's hand holding the dagger. Or so he thought, when —

"Haaah!" Stab, stab, stab. The attacker attempted a rush

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attack of thrusts, in what was truly a desperate attack. However, Rio could see through all of it, accurately handling each attack.

The one at the back isn't moving... If so, I'll take care of this one first, Rio determined in an instant and shifted his body slightly to the side. The sharp thrust of the attacker sliced through the air a hair's breadth away from Rio's torso.

Rio proceeded to go around the attacker's flank and used his left hand to snatch the dagger away. After cleanly toppling his opponent by kicking his feet out from under him, the attacker floated in the air for a moment. Then, Rio landed a sharp backhanded chop to the attacker's abdomen.

"Gah...!" The assailant's body hit the ground with great force, knocking him out with a groan.

"*Photon Projectilis!*" The other assailant waiting behind the first one read Rio's movements and aimed his finger before chanting a spell.

Archer... so they meant a long-ranged attack. Rio held the dagger he stole from the attacker at the ready. In the next moment, several bullets of magic light came firing towards Rio.

"Hah!" Rio locked on all the flying bullets within his sight and poured magic essence into the dagger in his hand. He raised its strength with spirit arts, then swung it faster than the eye could see, mowing down the assailant's bullets one after another, scattering them.

"Wha...?!" Both the attacker who fired the photon bullets and those who witnessed the scene were all rendered speechless. In the meantime, Rio simply adjusted his grip on the dagger to a backhanded one and charged at the frozen attacker.

"Guh..." Using the pommel of the dagger, he struck the attacker in the solar plexus. The attacker clutched his stomach as he collapsed.

As a result, the only one remaining conscious on the stairs

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was Rio.

Reinforcements came running downstairs, and they've captured all the attackers. As for above… Rio looked below and confirmed the six attackers at the foot of the stairs were being apprehended. Next, he moved to go upstairs.

Reinforcements came through the door. The fight upstairs is over, Aishia's voice echoed in Rio's head. Once he confirmed the battle was completely over, Rio decided to abide by the rules of the banquet and discarded the dagger in his hand, effectively laying down his arms. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Oooh!" The royalty and nobility in the hall who had been watching Rio cheered. Those cheers soon reached every end of the hall.

Goodness me, what a sight to behold, as always. I didn't expect this many troops to stand any real chance, but he really took the spotlight. Reiss watched Rio with admiration from the crowd of guests taking refuge at the back of the first floor space.

"…Hey, Reiss." Sylvie said.

"Oh? My name is Jean Bernard, Princess Sylvie." Reiss shrugged his shoulders, grinning.

"The attack just now… don't tell me…" Sylvie glared at Reiss with suspicion.

"Tell you what?" Reiss cocked his head nonchalantly.

"…I have something to discuss with you later. Don't try and pull anything strange, got it?" Sylvie seemed to be aware of the people around her, as she threatened Reiss in a low voice.

"I'm not sure what you've misunderstood here, but are you suspecting me of doing something?" Reiss responded aloofly.

"Silence. If you did what I suspect you of doing, you may drag our kingdom down into an international dispute. You're telling me everything later," Sylvie pressed in a

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demanding tone.

“Well, I suppose I have borrowed your little sister as a sign of our friendship, after all. I could entertain you in some discussion as a return for that,” Reiss chuckled with a smirk.

“Ngh…”

“Oh my, how scary.” When the glare in Sylvie’s eyes intensified, Reiss gave a casual shrug.

Meanwhile, Francois was rushing the knights into transporting the unconscious assailants. He didn’t want them to be within view of the guests for too long. “Hurry it up. Find out who they are no matter what. Start the investigation inside the building too.”

The knights promptly dashed about the hall, carrying the apprehended and unconscious attackers outside.

After Francois had given out orders, he turned to Rio and Rui to thank them. “Haruto, you have done a great deed. Your ability to repel the attackers coming up from the stairs was truly splendid. Sir Rui, thank you for driving back the enemy too.”

“I simply fired two arrows. No matter what you think of it, Haruto contributed the most. In fact, I’m sure he would have managed perfectly fine without me,” Rui said, passing the achievement onto Rio.

“The guests will be on standby within the hall until we can confirm the area is secured. But I’d like to officially announce your meritorious deeds to raise morale. Will you cooperate with this?” Francois asked, cleverly wanting to put their military exploits to good use.

“Gladly.”

“Of course.” Rui and Rio agreed readily. Rio’s efforts by the staircase had been witnessed by all the nobles in the hall, and many of them also had seen Rui use his divine arms for a brief moment, too. It was the perfect morale booster.

As a result — on top of the fact that no one other than the assailants had been killed in the attack — Rio and Rui

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received an abundance of praise from the guests.

Exactly as planned. Now, to remove the evidence. Reiss looked up at Rio and Rui on the upper floor and casually reached into his breast pocket, crushing the small gems there. At the same time, the assailants that had been carried outside all began to writhe in pain, their bodies convulsing as they died. However, at that point, no one inside the venue was aware.

Afterward, the safety of the area around the venue was confirmed and the curtains closed on the second night of the banquet, with no official notice of the assailants' deaths.

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Epilogue: The Wandering Knight

The next morning, Rio was summoned to the audience room for a formal audience with King Francois. He had been called to formally receive a reward for his efforts in the banquet last night.

Presently, the audience room was packed with royalty and nobility. Among them were Miharu, Satsuki, and Liselotte, as well as the heroes and high ranking officials invited from other kingdoms.

Rui's reward had been discussed and decided upon before Rio's, so this audience was for Rio's sake alone.

"Now, Haruto. You did us a tremendous deed last night. Unfortunately we do not have much time, so I shall get straight to business. This is about your reward." Francois began, getting straight to the point.

"It is my greatest honor to receive your praise. However, as I acted to protect myself, I do not require any particular reward," Rio declined with humility. He didn't have anything he desired in particular, and, more importantly, feared he would be bestowed with a title that came with collateral duties. But as Rio refused the reward so readily, the audience hall stirred with noise.

"Now, do not trouble me so. It has been custom since ancient times to reward great deeds accordingly. Not doing so would affect not only my honor as king, but the honor of the entire kingdom. Especially for someone who has achieved as many meritorious deeds as you," Francois said with an uneven smile.

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“But, Your Majesty…” Rio lowered his head, expressing his disagreement with reserve.

“How about it, Haruto? Would you reconsider your previous decision and serve this kingdom? We are prepared to treat you appropriately and promote you to a high-ranking knight.” As Rio expected, Francois offered a social position as a reward.

“…I am extremely delighted at the honor of receiving your favor. However, as I have informed Your Majesty already, I cannot remain fixed to one location. More than anything, a novice like me will only be inadequate in this great role. That is why, with all due respect…” Rio chose his words of refusal carefully, so as not to burn any bridges.

“Then, if I may ask, is there anything that you desire?”

“…Nothing in particular.”

“Hmph. At this point, I must say I respect your level of indifference. One would normally express some form of desire here. How difficult it is to reward a man with no desire for status or wealth.” Francois chuckled with stifled laughter. “However, this is precisely why I hold interest in you as a person. For you to have no desire for status — does this mean you are burdened by other bonds or responsibility? Let us hear your answer,” he said, staring at Rio.

“…Yes, Your Majesty,” Rio nodded.

“And may I ask for the reason why?” Francois questioned with interest.

“…I am not a man with a large enough caliber to live while burdened with bonds and responsibilities. That is why,” Rio stated his feelings honestly.

Francois hummed to himself and stared at Rio’s face for a moment. “I see… Then, I have decided. I shall grant you the title of an honorary knight.” The royalty and nobility in the audience room stirred noisily at his words.

“Huh? But I…” Rio didn’t quite understand the meaning

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behind the title, objecting through his confusion. Based on the reactions of the hall, it didn't seem like a normal position in the least, and the thought of having duties forced upon him was unbearable.

"An honorary knight is a modern title presented to those who have contributed great military deeds to the kingdom, regardless of being a citizen. It is a title of a knight with no duties to the kingdom, as they are not one of my subjects to command. In other words, a knight with no master. However, you will be publicly treated as the same rank as other nobility. Is it not the perfect reward for you, who does not wish to be burdened with more bonds or responsibilities? If you disagree, we'll have to return to the drawing board, and I'll have to give you 10,000 pieces of my gold instead. Well, how about it?" Francois asked cheerfully.

For the record, the royals and nobles in the room had stirred so noisily because of how special the title of an honorary knight was. First, one had to obtain the strong trust of the one who had appointive power — that is, the king or a high-ranked successor to the throne — which couldn't be done lightly. Furthermore, Rio was yet to realize this, but an honorary knight was a modern title that had no duties to the kingdom, yet was on par with the status of a count. In an emergency, he could even command the kingdom's knights at his own discretion.

In other words, he was receiving power without duty. The exception among exceptions, even within nobility. That being said, those appointed with the title normally had some other position to the kingdom and fulfilled their duties there instead. However, in Rio's case, he had no status other than that of the honorary knight, so he was truly able to receive nothing but the benefits.

"...Yes, Your Majesty." While Rio still didn't have a complete grasp on the meaning of the title, he was spurred by the number of gold coins presented and the air in the

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room to nod.

"Then, let's finalize this before you change your mind. It is customary for an honorary knight to be presented with a nickname. Let's see..." Francois hummed to himself and stared at Rio, before he immediately seemed to think of something and grinned. "All right. From now on, you may don the title of 'The Black Knight.' Black cannot be stained by any other color — it is most fitting for a person like you," he said grandly. In reality, the nickname bestowed by the king was another reason why the honorary knight was envied.

The Black... Knight? Rio's thoughts came to a screeching halt for several seconds. Then, once he regained his composure, he turned the name over in his head once more.

The Black Knight...

What even was that?

It was an embarrassing and shameful title. There was no way he wanted to be called The Black Knight, nor did he want to introduce himself as so. However —

"I humbly accept this appointment, Your Majesty." Rio showed no sign of his thinking as he accepted the order with the utmost formality. He lowered his head and glanced around the room casually, making eye contact with Miharu and Satsuki in the corner of the room.

"Hehe..." Satsuki was trying to stifle her giggles, her hand pressed against her mouth. Meanwhile, Miharu was simply staring at Rio. It was unclear what she was thinking of.

Satsuki's enjoying herself and laughing away. Miharu... I guess hearing the name doesn't make it click, huh? Rio guessed at what the two were thinking, a strained smile at his mouth.

"Now, that aside, you will be permitted to name yourself with a family name from now on. You may choose one freely, but have it prepared by tonight if possible, so that it can be presented at the banquet. Although this is not a strict

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deadline…” Francois informed Rio.

“A family name…?” Rio thought for several seconds, before his brow twitched. There was one family name that immediately came to mind from his current name as Haruto.

“Based on that look on your face, you already have a candidate?” Francois sensed the change in Rio’s expression.

“No, well…” Rio hesitated for a moment, stumbling for words.

If I say this family name out loud, here and now, there will be no going back anymore, he thought to himself.

But is there a need to go back at all? he also thought at the same time. There might be no need to give his Japanese name from when he was alive, but there was meaning in doing so. That was the oath he made to himself.

…I’ve decided already. So, I should just say it. It would completely close off any chance of running away if I said it now. No, there’s no better time than now. Miharu’s been reunited with Satsuki, and now Takahisa has appeared. There’s no reason to keep the truth from her any longer. Rio took a deep breath and prepared to sever any chance of his ability to escape this decision.

“Well?” Francois tilted his head doubtfully.

“There is one family name that comes to mind,” Rio uttered.

“Oh? Let us hear it.” Francois’ eyes widened with curiosity.

“Amakawa…” Rio said.

“Wh…” Miharu’s body shook slightly as she took a breath. Satsuki simply blinked.

“Amakawa, you say?” Francois said, pronouncing the unfamiliar family name awkwardly.

Rio shot a quick glance at Miharu before resolutely stating his family name. “Yes. Haruto Amakawa. If I could go by that name in the future…”

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Afterword

Hello, everyone. This is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 9 — Heroes in the Moonlight*.

So, we've finally reached the banquet arc! This volume contains the highest page count yet, and the banquet arc will reach its climax in Volume 10, so please look forward to it! Furthermore, on December 27, the first volume of the comics version of *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* goes on sale, and those who purchase both volumes (including this one) will gain access to read a novella online that is several thousand characters long, so please check out Volume 1 of the comic too (it's a jam-packed bonus about what happens behind the main story). The comic itself will also have its own original bonuses, as well as a cute bonus comic of Professor Celia! Finally, *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* campaigns are being held everywhere, including on Twitter and in bookstores where you can find giant signboards of Professor Celia. Please go check them out!

Yuri Kitayama
Early December, 2017

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Bonus Short Stories

Bathing with the Professor?!

A few days after Miharu, Latifa, and the others had arrived at the stone house and began living together…

It was night time, after the house had fallen silent with all its residents fast asleep.

“Phew…”

Rio had finished his night training and was soaking in the bath alone. In the bathroom, where sounds echoed easily, he sighed away his exhaustion from the day. Suddenly, the door to the bathroom rattled open.

“Eh?” Rio had completely let his guard down, so he looked towards the doorway in shock. Standing there was Celia, her body hidden beneath a loosely-wrapped bath towel.

“Huh. The light’s on…”

Celia met Rio’s eyes with a look of surprise.

“P-Professor…?”

Rio was also taken aback, frozen inside the bathtub. They remained that way, their eyes locked on one another.

“R-Rio…? Kya?!” Celia squeaked, tightening the bath towel around her body in panic.

“S-Sorry!” Rio apologized, averting his eyes. Although her body had been hidden by the towel, he’d just witnessed his teacher in her most defenseless state, after all.

“N-No, it’s okay! I’m the one who should be sorry. I came in without checking if it was occupied! Aha, ahaha… aah…” Celia started explaining in a fluster, but the embarrassment eventually caught up to her, turning her bright red as she struggled for words.

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“Umm… I’ll get out, then. Please get in,” Rio offered awkwardly.

“N-No, it’s okay! I’ll get in later.” Celia said, retreating to the changing room in a rush.

“You’re already naked, so putting your clothes back on now would just make you cold. I’m already warmed up enough, so,” Rio informed her, as her head peered around the changing room door.

“N-Naked…” Reminded once again of her nakedness, Celia’s head short-circuited as she blushed harder.

“That’s why I’ll get out now. Can you look the other way?”

After a moment of silence, Celia turned towards Rio with determination. “…W-Wait.”

“…Yes?”

“S-Since it’s just the two of us, how about we chat a little?”

“Huh? Do you mean…”

Did she mean for them to bathe together? Rio was so taken aback, his expression went blank in shock.

“S-Shall we bathe together? Of course, that’s only if you’re okay with it…”

So that *was* what she meant. Celia made this proposition to Rio in a squeaky voice, watching his expression timidly.

A-Am I being too bold?! B-But I couldn’t let this chance go! Miharu and Sara and everyone are all such nice, cute girls! she agonized to herself while blushing furiously.

“I don’t… mind, but… Well, we’ll be a man and a woman naked together.” Rio was fairly baffled as he spoke.

“I-It’s fine if you don’t stare at my body. It’d be one thing if it was some other man, but it’s you.” Celia looked away from Rio’s eyes out of embarrassment, restlessly moving about.

“You don’t feel uncomfortable, Professor?” Rio asked while watching Celia’s face.

“O-Of course I do! But, well, we don’t normally have time to ourselves because everyone else is around, you know?

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There are things I don't want to say in front of the others, so... that's why... I'm coming in!" Though her face was still bright red, Celia became impatient and marched into the bathroom.

"Wait—?!" Rio looked away in a fluster.

"D-Don't look this way, okay? I'm going to wash myself first." Celia used the magic artifacts in the washing area to produce water and clean her body.

"Uh..."

The sound of her scrubbing herself clean soon reached Rio's ears, making him gulp. Who knew how much time passed? After a while, he heard the sound of water running, washing away the soap.

"I-I'm getting in now."

Splash. Celia had entered the bath. *Splash*, *splash*. She waded through the water, making her way towards Rio.

"I-I'm done."

Celia stopped roughly one meter away from Rio and sat down, their positions back-to-back.

"...I'm a little surprised. What did you want to talk about?" Rio sighed tiredly and questioned Celia sitting behind him.

"Huh? Ah, r-right. Talking. Umm, I was thinking about how I've had a bath every day since coming to this house, so it'll be hard to return to my previous lifestyle. Ahaha." Celia forced a smile on her face and came up with a topic on the spot.

"I... see... So that means you intend on returning to your previous life as a noble." Rio was a little taken aback, a subtle expression on his face.

"Huh? A-Ah, yeah, umm, no..." Celia blinked at the unexpected turn of the conversation.

I-I can't say that wasn't what I was thinking at all! B-But I did want to discuss that topic in more detail! Celia thought uncomfortably.

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“Hmm? Is someone inside the bathroom?”

The door to the bathroom cracked open, letting the voice of a sleepy Masato waft through.

“Y-Yeah. Masato. I was just about to get out, though.”

“Oh, okay. The lights in the changing room were on, so…” Masato yawned. “I'm going to the toilet and heading to bed. Good night.” With a great yawn, Masato turned around and left.

“Ahaha. Should we get out after all?” Celia said awkwardly.

Maybe I should make a sign that says ‘Occupied’ for the changing room door, Rio thought.

The First Princess at the Academy

It was Year 996 of the Holy Era. Rio was still enrolled at the Royal Academy of Beltrum, and it was the day after he had emerged victorious in the mock battle against Charles Arbor.

Christina, who was a sixth grader of the elementary division and first princess of the kingdom, was accompanied by her classmate and childhood friend Roanna on a walk around the academy after school. There were still many students remaining on the campus grounds and conversations were taking place around every corner. However, it felt like today’s chatter was particularly heated—especially that of the girls from younger grades.

“…The lower-grade girls seem to be rather noisy today,” Christina said suddenly, seeing the restless students.

“That’s because, well…” The answer that came from Roanna was evasive.

Christina stopped walking. “Do you know something?”

“Well…”

“Speak.”

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Roanna was hesitant, but resolved herself at Christina's urging. "I believe the results of the mock battles yesterday are a hot topic right now."

"The mock battles? Ah…" Christina said with a rather uncomfortable look. It wasn't a displeased one, but there was a slight hint of a darker expression. That look soon disappeared from her face as she turned to observe the girls in lower grades nearby.

They were talking about someone in particular; whether it was intentional or not, they were purposefully avoiding saying the name, but it was clear who the subject was based on the conversation: Rio.

The girls were so engrossed in their conversation, they didn't realize Christina and Roanna were nearby. Then, one female student came running up to the group of noisy girls.

"I-I passed on the letter! Oh no, whatever shall I do, whatever shall I do?!"

The newly arrived female student seemed to be rather excited, reporting something in a disoriented tone.

Eavesdropping was something she frowned upon, so Christina immediately tried to leave, but the curious word she caught made her slow her steps.

…*A letter?*

"Really?!"

"Did you tell him you like him clearly?! Did he reply?! Please give us the details!"

The girls grew even more excited. Based on the conversation, the one girl had probably just given someone a love letter.

The annual mock battle with the knights was a gateway for the male students of the academy to achieve success in life. Being that he'd been the only person who'd bested a knight this year, it was inevitable that the attention would focus on Rio and flip the girls' perception of him completely.

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That being said, reality wasn't quite as simple as that. No matter how good his results were, his origins as an orphan meant Rio would always be seen with a bias. Now that he had demonstrated his ability, it was possible for him to become a knight, but it was clear that his future would be strongly criticized. Once the girls had a taste of that reality, their perceptions of him would no doubt flip once again.

"...Let's go, Roanna." Christina sighed quietly and made to leave the scene for real this time.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness," Roanna nodded, but the look on her face wasn't at ease and Christina immediately saw through it.

"You look like you have something to say."

"N-No, not at all!" Roanna shook her head furiously.

"Oh? Are you trying to hide something from me?" Christina asked with a daring smile.

"N-No... T-Then, if I may ask, what do you think of him, Princess Christina?"

"Him?" Christina pretended not to know who she was referring to.

"I-I mean... about Rio." Despite her reluctance to do so, Roanna uttered Rio's name out loud.

"...Nothing in particular," Christina answered bluntly.

"T-Then, what do you think about the fact that he is being severely undervalued? I'm sure you've noticed already, but his talents far exceed that of a prodigy. Would it not be a loss to this kingdom for his abilities to rot away like this?"

Uttering Rio's name out loud seemed to have broken the usual dam on Roanna had on her words.

Christina's eyes widened faintly in surprise. "It's rare to see you praise someone so much."

"I-I have simply accepted the facts for what they are and stated my words with the kingdom's benefit in mind," said Roanna. She found it a waste to have a person like Rio neglected like this. Her way of thinking was truly logical.

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“Then you should understand, no? Right now, the people of this kingdom blindly accept that the only way to gain social status is to drag down the others around them. Do you think someone like him would be treated fairly in a kingdom like that?” As Christina spoke, her tone turned somewhat self-contemptuous.

“B-But…” Though she tried to argue, Roanna found herself at a loss for words.

“Let’s go.” Christina had nothing more to say and left.

Want Something

It was Year 996 of the Holy Era.

Located in Beltrant, the capital of the Kingdom of Beltrum, was Celia’s underground research laboratory, located under the library tower of the Royal Academy.

“Congratulations on moving up a grade, Rio.”

“Thank you very much, Professor.”

Rio had reached a new school year, so they were celebrating his entrance into the sixth grade of the elementary division.

“You’re already twelve, huh… Time sure flies,” Celia said with an emotional tone.

“Yes. These last five years went by quickly.”

“That much time has passed since we met…”

“I’ve finally reached the same age as you when we first met.”

“Which makes me seventeen… Ugh, only three more years until I’m twenty.”

The ideal marriage age for noblewomen was from their mid-teens to twenty years old. Recalling that made Celia’s face darken slightly with a frown.

“You’re still young, Professor,” Rio chuckled.

“Hmph! This is no laughing matter!” Celia pouted, looking at Rio with a reproachful gaze.

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“Sorry. You’re worrying about something you needn’t worry about, so I couldn’t help myself.”

“…That’s not true. Girls the same age as me have already married, and I’ve spent these last years in my research lab whenever I’m not teaching. Even I know my research life is rather dull,” Celia said, laughing at herself scornfully.

“That’s just the way you are. What’s wrong with that? Also, I had a lot of fun in the time I spent with you in your research lab. Are you saying you didn’t?”

“P-Putting it that way isn’t fair. Of course I did…”

Of course she’d had fun. Celia blushed and avoided Rio’s gaze.

“Of course?”

“O-Of course I’ve had fun. I’m having fun right now,” Celia replied shyly.

“Thank goodness. If you were all withered and dry, then I’d be the same.”

Rio beamed with a happy smile. Outside of his time studying and training, he was practically always underground with Celia in her lab.

“…I think you could act your age a bit more, Rio. You’ve got an oddly philosophical view on things when you should be more like other boys your age.”

“Even if you tell me to act like the other boys…”

“For example, is there something you want? I wanted to give you a present to celebrate the new school year, but I didn’t know what you’d like,” Celia said.

“No, but I appreciate the thought,” Rio refused reflexively.

“See? That’s what I mean. Normal children would be using this chance to beg for something… You don’t need to hold yourself back. Try saying what you want honestly, just for today. If I can get it for you, I will. You’re always taking care of me, so it’ll also be thanks for that,” Celia insisted.

“Even so…” Rio still tried to refuse, but it didn’t seem like Celia was willing to accept that right now. Rio thought about

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what he wanted in his current situation.

Then, after a moment—

"...In that case," he started.

"In that case?" Celia watched Rio's face expectantly.

"Could you give me some of your time in the future, Professor? To spend like this, drinking tea and chatting," Rio requested, staring back at Celia's face. Celia blinked blankly for several moments.

"...B-But that's what we always do! Asking for it in the future is...!" she shouted shrilly, cheeks turning red.

"Then please give me even more of your time. I want this time to be routine for us... Because I consider that to be a great luxury. Is that okay?" Rio said, peering at Celia's face closely.

"Uh..."

It was almost like a confession, but Rio himself didn't realize it. Despite understanding that *that* wasn't how he'd meant it, Celia couldn't help but blush.

"...A-All right. If you're fine with something like that, then I'll give you my time." With her pride and dignity as an older woman, Celia bit down on her lip and maintained a calm disposition as she nodded.

"Thank you very much." Rio looked quite happy as he gave a bright smile.

Elemental ☆ Princess Service!

On Earth, in Japan, somewhere in the city...

One afternoon on Christmas Day, Haruto, Miharu, Suzune, and Rikka were visiting Celia's house in the suburbs.

"Okay, we're here!" Suzune announced when they arrived before the gate, having visited many times before.

"Every time I see it I'm impressed..." Miharu muttered, overwhelmed by the grandeur of the mansion. She had

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visited several times with Haruto before, but it was still far too big for a single woman to live in alone. However, two girls had moved in just recently, bringing the total number of residents up to three. Today, they had been invited to a house party for Celia to introduce the two newcomers to them.

"Amakawa-senpai, was it really okay for me to be invited along too?" Minamoto Rikka—Haruto and Miharu's middle school underclassman—asked rather worriedly. She had become acquainted with Haruto by chance just the other day at the school festival, after which Haruto realized they took the same bus from school and started talking to her more. However, Rikka and Celia had never met directly before.

"Of course. One of the girls here will be joining your grade after the new year, having moved here from overseas, so we hope you two can become friends. I haven't met them before either, so there's no need to be afraid."

"Oh, really? What is she like?"

Haruto and Rikka chatted like that in a familiar manner for a while. Meanwhile, Suzune rang the doorbell and waited.

"Hi! We're here waiting. Come in, come in." Celia's voice came out of the intercom and the gate opened. Suzune led the way from the electric gate to the front door with familiar footsteps, everyone else behind her.

Celia stood waiting in front of the door to the residence. "Welcome everyone. You must be Rikka. I've heard a lot about you from Haruto. It's cold outside, so let's all go in first."

Thus, they entered the residence and followed Celia to the living room where the party was being held.

"I've told you about how two girls are moving into my place, right? Their names are Christina and Flora, and both are from my homeland—and a fairly distinguished family at that. But they've asked that you treat them casually. Lady

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Christina's out at the moment, but I can introduce Lady Flora to you first. I'm going to open the door now," Celia explained on the way there. But when she opened the door to reveal what was waiting in the living room on the other side...

"Huh...?"

It was the young beauty Flora, dressed in a mini-skirt Santa costume. Haruto, Miharu, and Rikka were all rendered speechless.

"Wow, how adorable!" Suzune said, her eyes sparkling.

"I-It's nice to meet you. I'm Flora Beltrum," Flora said, bowing her head.

"Nice... to meet you..." Haruto and the others slowly returned the bow.

Why is she dressed as Santa? They all wondered to themselves.

"Umm, Professor Celia said dressing like this at Japanese Christmas parties would make the guests happy, s-so it was embarrassing, but I did my best." Flora seemed to be able to gather the thoughts behind their gazes, as she blushed furiously.

"Yup, Lady Flora said she wanted to give everyone a proper welcome, so I discussed it with Suzune and researched it," Celia boasted smugly.

Professor, the information you found was probably wrong! Haruto and the others thought to themselves.

"Hehe, what do you think, Haruto onii-san? Don't you want to see Celia, Miharu, Rikka, and me in Santa costumes too?" Suzune asked boldly despite her shy smile.

"Ahaha, I've actually prepared them for everyone..."

Apparently, they had planned things out together with Suzune, as Celia offered outfits to everyone.

"Ah, no..."

Haruto was at a loss for words. He looked at Miharu and Rikka standing beside him for help, but the two of them

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were watching him for his reaction instead. Celia seemed to be a little embarrassed before Haruto, while Suzune was looking at him expectantly.

How do I reply to this?

Haruto, being a man, was cornered into an agonizing decision.

Professor Celia's Way of the Fluff

In the Galarc Kingdom, inside the stone house…

It was the day after Rio had brought Miharu and the others out of the spirit folk village and met up at the house.

"Ehehe, it always feels so good when Onii-chan pets me…"

Latifa was clinging to Rio adoringly, as usual. They sat on the living room sofa together with her head in Rio's lap, grinning happily as she was being petted. It wasn't particularly shocking to Miharu and Sara's groups, as they were familiar with how close the two of them were, but that wasn't the case for Celia, who was witnessing it for the first time.

Sara shot Latifa an envious glance before explaining things with a sigh. "This is normal for the two of them."

"Oh, really…" Celia looked at them once again. Rio looked like he was petting her out of obligation, and it wasn't as though they were flirting romantically, so it did seem like they were just sharing the moment as siblings.

Well, she was a little bothered by how Aishia had taken up a spot next to Rio and was pressing closer… Even so, seeing Latifa's deep happiness was enough to deter her from putting a damper on things. And, most importantly—

Oh, she's so cute!

Latifa's tail flickered as her ears twitched. Each time Rio petted her, Latifa's fluffy ears and tail moved around happily, stealing Celia's gaze. The night before, when she had touched Sara's tail in the bath, it had also been

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delightfully bushy, and she couldn't help but wonder what Latifa's tail felt like.

I want to touch the fluffy…

Celia followed the movement of Latifa's tail intently. Rio noticed her gaze.

"Is something the matter, Professor?" he asked.

"Huh…? Ah, umm…"

Celia's mind went blank for a moment, but she soon gathered her courage and gulped. "Can I fluff the tail too?".

Thus began Celia's progression down the way of the fluff.

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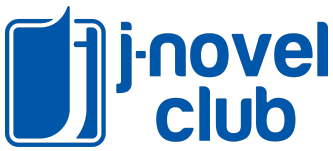

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